



# FAR POINT

Issue No. 3 - March/April 1992

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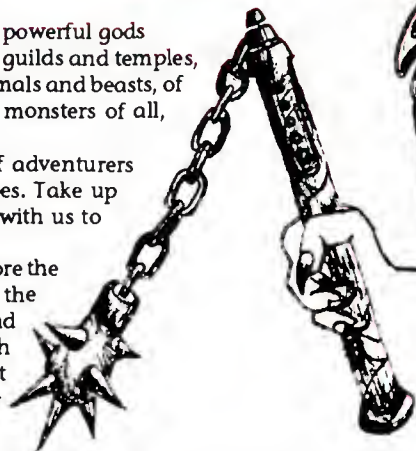
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A Substitute for Love: *D. B. Normanton*

Cryptogram: *Stewart "Staz" Johnson*

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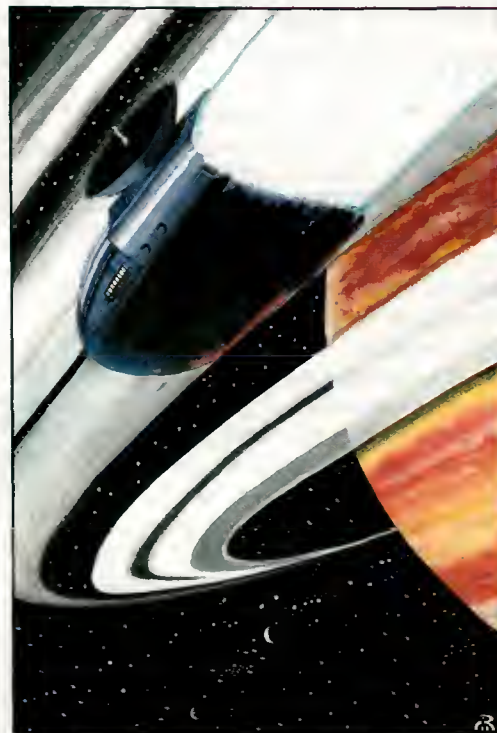
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# VIEW POINT

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY INTERZONE

It was a sobering thought. We sat back and congratulated ourselves on putting the finishing touches to the magazine that you hold in your hands - our third edition, marking a whole four months in business - and then realised that March marks the tenth anniversary of **Interzone** commencing publication. Those ten years have shown a steady and successful rise - recession considered - culminating in a change to monthly format a couple of years ago, and have put the magazine into its pre-eminent position as market leader. By the time you read this, David Pringle's 57th issue will be on the newstands. Whatever your preference in SF and Fantasy (and **Interzone** has taken plenty of knocks over its house style, recently), this is a major achievement in SF magazine publishing. Many congratulations, David, and best wishes for the next ten years.

## ACTORS, MISSILES, SATURN PROBES AND AUDI QUATTROS.

However, back to **FAR POINT**. Lined up for you this month is a collection of stories covering the length and breadth of the genre, as before. **Charles Stross** investigates the slump in book buying in "The Midlist Bombers" and comes up with a radical solution (any similarity between characters depicted in the story and persons living or dead is purely coincidental, honestly!); **Keith Brooke** contemplates the price paid for preservation of a visionary life in "See Those Eyes", and **Alan Fisk** looks at the collision between live theatre and computer-generated entertainment ("Joe Grimaldi Meets Shakespeare"). **Peter Hamilton's** "Double Year Lost" brilliantly conveys

an unusual love story in a post-Warring England of the near-future. We have the second of three episodes of **D B Normanton's** grotesque fantasy "A Substitute For Love", and **Peter Tennant** constructs a chilling domestic drama in "The Cryptogram". There's plenty more, both fiction and non-fiction. And the Audi Quattro? You'll just have to ask **John Duffield** about that.

## A QUESTION OF COVERS

Speaking of **Interzone**, one or two readers with longer memories may have noticed the startling similarity between the front cover of **FAR POINT** Issue 2 and that of **Interzone** No 39. Someone who certainly did was the artist David A Hardy, a **FAR POINT** subscriber, who had painted the **IZ** cover, and subsequently sold it on for "New Destinations" Vol IX. We hadn't seen this particular work.

A justifiably indignant David wrote to us (apparently within seconds of receiving his copy) pointing out the clear breach of his copyright. We were horrified to receive his letter, and to see the copies that proved his point beyond argument. We were able to assure him that the painting for our cover was commissioned in good faith, from another artist, as a general request for artwork illustrating a spacecraft and a planet. We had not asked for a copy of David's work!

We put the two artists in touch with each other. David received an apology and explanation, which justified the lapse by blaming research on a collage of images that the other artist had come across, out of context. While David suggests that "we all put it down to experience", I have arranged for the cover artwork fee to go to him instead, in recompense for the unintended breach.

What David must have found particularly galling was the fact that, only days before he saw the offending cover, we had agreed terms with him for the use of his work on the cover and centrespread of **FAR POINT** Issue 3...

## SPECIAL SUBSCRIPTION OFFER

This month we're delighted to announce the start of a special subscription offer, supported by three major publishers. SF Books from Pan MacMillan, Hodder & Stoughton and The Women's Press are now available **FREE** to new subscribers to **FAR POINT**.

This superb offer has been made possible by the kind assistance of these publishers. My thanks to them all! Full details of this offer can be found on page 7.



# TALKING POINTS

We welcome your letter on any SF/Fantasy-related subject. Obviously, we reserve the right to edit what we print, and we particularly look forward to your comments on FAR POINT.

What follows is a sample of letters we have received commenting on FP so far. We've had far more than we can print, but the following extracts represents the general consensus.

**Congratulations** on the launch of **FAR POINT**. I discovered issue No 2 on the bookshelves last week. I was particularly impressed by Love 40. A very nice piece by Piers Anthony. **A. Crompton**  
*Falmouth*

**Many thanks for FAR POINT 1 & 2**, which I enjoyed reading at least as much, if not more, than my usual SF magazine. I particularly liked Mark Close's "Blind The Mouse" and Maggie Freeman's "The Door Specialist" in Issue 1 - it's nice to see that you're not averse to publishing grown up stories.

In fact there was only one story in Issue 1 which I didn't think was well written "Conspiracy of Souls" - all the rest, regardless of genre or target age group, were good examples of their kind - a very impressive start for a new magazine.

I was less impressed with Issue 2 - even the professional contributions were rather weak, and I couldn't understand D B Normanton at all - was it a joke? **P. J. L. Hinder**  
*Bristol*

**May I wish you every success with FAR POINT**. It's a glossy production and lots of adverts give it the feel of a real magazine. The variety of the stories is also a plus. Even if the first story is a bummer so far there has been a sufficient breadth of the story type to maintain most readers' interest at least part of the time. My own preference was not for the lead story in **FAR POINT** no 2 but other stories made up for the deficiency.

However, (there's always a down side) there was a fault in Cyril Bracegirdle's story, "The

Man Who Shot Dinosaurs". Bracegirdle said that the bones of the newly shot dinosaur were carbon dated to 114 million years ago. Whoops! Carbon dating depends on elapsed time so that something killed yesterday and brought forward in time would not lose its carbon 14. It would test as old as yesterday. Of course if passage through the time machine aged the dinosaur bones then it should also de-age the travellers going the other way and they would arrive in the Cretaceous 114 million years young; but we know that this did not occur because he states that the bones had not degenerated at all, and the strip of calico was still perfect. Still, nice try. Keep it up.

**B. Johnson**  
*Leamington Spa*

*I take your point about the Carbon 14. Cyril Bracegirdle comments that "obviously no-one has yet time-transported anything, so the point is theoretical", but internal consistency would have improved things, I'll grant you. As you say, though, a nice try.*

*The Editor.*

**Just a note to congratulate you** on the first couple of issues of **FAR POINT** — there are never enough British SF magazines around, and I hope you achieve the success you deserve for your effort simply in launching one.

I find myself a little bemused by the attitude that was hinted at by your Issue 1 editorial, and picked up with enthusiasm by some of the letters in Issue 2. I know that Americans think that British SF is gloomy and pessimistic, but it would be smarter of us Brits to look at the evi-

dence before visualising "optimistic, entertaining" **FAR POINT** squaring up against the "arti-farty literati" of the existing UK magazines - which, in practice, presumably means *Interzone*. Don't let any of this put you off; I just wish people would look at the facts rather than their prior assumptions.

All of which said, looking at **FAR POINT 2**, I have to confess mixed feelings. I can see that the offer of some famous names for your cover would be very tempting, but you really shouldn't have let Piers Anthony palm you off with amateurish nonsense like "Love 40", and the Niven/Barnes extract wasn't so special either. Nor were the newcomers perfect; Cyril Bracegirdle's "The Man Who Shot Dinosaurs" was downright terrible. Other stories in this issue weren't this bad, but too many of them were just second-rate. "A Substitute" ... bored me, and "Pure Maths" wasn't worth the effort. Fortunately, some did work; "The Dragon, Fly" was a bit twee, but not irretrievable, "Shadow Casters", "The Crystal Man" and "Doppelganger" were tolerable, and "Lucifer Falling" was fun, as well as fitting with your declared aims. Encourage Julian Flood; he could be a genuine discovery.

Oh, and the non-fiction is to be encouraged too. And could we have some more book reviews?

Wishing you every success in the future. All the best.

**Phil Masters**  
*Baldock*

*Thanks for taking the time and trouble to give such a detailed analysis. I still think that we're hitting a more upbeat note than several other magazine (not just Interzone; there's an active small press) but I'm going to remain alert for "creeping dreariness"! I've never thought optimism meant "the good guys always win"; to me it means a view of the future that allows us to contemplate it without abject depression. We won't avoid the tougher subjects or a solemn tone; we just don't feel that they must be pre-eminent.*

*Non-fiction will certainly continue in every issue, but it won't be at the expense of fiction. More book reviews? Certainly, sir. Please see pages 54 - 60.*

*The Editor.*

**Thank you** for such a speedy reply in sending the sample issue. My first impressions of **FAR POINT** FROM Issue 2 - excellent value for money. "The Man Who Shot Dinosaurs" and "Pure Maths" echo in the mind a long time: both finely polished gems - the others were good too. Making, you, the reader think, as a good story should. **M. St. Pierre**  
*Cambis*

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My son and I are already hooked on **FAR POINT**, when I bought Issue 2 today I had to turn the shop upside down to finally find it in with the Bird Magazines.

**J. Taylor**  
*Largs*

*In our local shop, we found it between cookery and Cosmopolitan.*

*The Editor.*





# CONVENTIONS

## CON REPORT CASH?

*Why not get back some of the money you spent at the bookstalls/art auction/bar?*

*Send in a convention report to **FAR POINT!** Take a look at Johan D Sinclair's feature on Novacon 21 in our last issue as an example of what we're looking for. Good quality photos welcomed.*

*We'll pay our standard rates for any material we publish. One thousand words or less, please. Normal rules apply for submissions (S.A.E.'s, contact address etc.).*

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All listings are given in good faith and details are extracted from event publicity material.

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Leeds LS1 1UH

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# NEXT ISSUE



**FAR POINT Number 4 - the May/June 1992 Issue will be published on the 9th April.**

**For our usual mix of fantastic fiction, superb artwork and challenging non-fiction, subscribe or reserve your copy NOW!**

## SUBMISSIONS

**We always want to see new material, whether stories or illustrations. Stories should be less than 6,000 words long, typed or 'final' quality word-processed. Please don't send hundreds all in one go: one will do! Keep a copy of the MS, and include your name and address on it as well as on any accompanying letter. Unsolicited artwork should be for the front cover and centre spread only, or samples to show your style. Don't send originals; colour photocopies, transparencies or polaroids, etc. are far safer in the post. Return postage is essential, for acknowledgement and for return of MS or artwork. In all cases, please be prepared to wait around three months for a decision, although we'll acknowledge receipt pretty quickly.**



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# John Duffield

**I**t was a Saturday when I first met Marty. I was down the town just coming out of Waitrose with the shopping when I happened to overhear *Electric Motor*. I turned and saw some beatnik geek talking to the vacuum cleaner man. I should explain that on Saturdays in town the market stalls were everywhere, including the little pedestrian square in Bircherley Court. Anyhow that's where the vacuum cleaner man has his pitch, flogging bits of extension hose and rubber drive bands and the like. But no electric motors. "Phwooor mate," the vacuum cleaner man was saying to the beatnik. "Cost you sixty quid, and that's reconditioned."

I could tell from the split soles on the baseball boots that the beatnik wasn't kidding when he said sheet. He kind of winced, and I suppose I felt sorry for him.

"Ahem," I interrupted, ignoring the carrier bags pulling my armholes out of their sock-ets. "I've got some electric motors. Going cheap."

The vacuum cleaner man looked sour but the beatnik turned to gaze upon me like I was the sweet Lord Jesus bearing manna from heaven.

"Right on!"

**H**is name was Martin, but I could call him Marty. He lived in Ladywood Avenue only a couple of streets from me. He told me he didn't have any wheels at the moment so the lift back up the hill was well handy.

"No problem," I told him, driving along. "But how come I haven't see you around?"

"Well, I've been at University and stuff."

I looked across at him, keeping one eye on the road. He was maybe thirtysomething, a bit long in the tooth for the *METAL* on his T-shirt and the greaseball Levis. And he smelt, either him or his black leather jacket. Not bad, just kind of unwashed in a friendly sort of way. It's funny, I knew instinctively that I liked him, as if I'd always known him. Kind of click at first sight.

"Research mainly," he explained at last. "Postdoctorate stuff."

"What in?" I said, taking a right into Wisteria Drive.

"Magnetomechanical Engineering."

"Neat," I said as we pulled up. "I work for British Aerospace myself."

His eyes fair lit up. "Wow."

"Yeah," I said as we got out. I smiled wryly as I opened the tailgate. "In the accounts department."

"Oh." He was already gathering up the shopping bags, which felt OK somehow.

He followed me up the drive and in through the kitchen to dump his stuff. In the kitchen was the door that opened to the garage.

"Taraaah," I said pulling it open and flicking on the light.

Marty stared at the mountainous heaps of junk and jumble, his eyes lingering over the groaning shelves on the opposite wall and at the clutter on the workbench. I picked my way between pushchairs and bags of outgrown baby clothes to my trunk.

"They're in here. It's where I keep my bits and pieces."

But Marty wasn't listening. His eyes had locked on to the large square shape under a draping piece of carpet.

"Say, is that a washing machine?"

"Yeah, our old one. It kept leaking. I'm waiting for the council to come and get it."

By now Marty had bent down and was touching the white painted metal.

"Gosh, it's a Zanussi Turbostream." He turned and looked up at me like he'd found the Star of Africa. "Can I buy it?"

"It doesn't work."

"That doesn't matter. Really."

"Tell you what. It's going to cost me a tanner to have it collected. I was going to charge you a fiver each for the motors. You can have a couple for free if you take the washing machine off my hands."

"Christ, thanks Rick."

"Here you go." I threw open the lid of the trunk and came up with an electric motor in each hand. They were identical. One was from our old Hoover, and the other was from my mother's, a short term replacement until I did the decent thing and bought Sarah a soupie dupe Electrolux with all mod cons.

"Gold dust," Marty sighed. "There's just one thing ..."

"I know, I know, you got no wheels, man. Come on, let's get it into the Quattro."

**M**arty's house was *that* house. The one with the rain forest garden and the buckled garage door. I'd seen his mother in passing, a bun-haired old lady with a crinkle smile and a permanent pinnie. She stood on the step watching us unload the washing machine and swank it up the drive.

"More equipment for your project, Martin?"

"Yes, ma," Marty blushed. He introduced us, then delved for his keys to open the garage door. His mother wiped her hands on her tea towel and bade her leave as Marty did the old open sesame.

What a contrast. Whereas my garage was a pile of garbage, Marty's was white painted and clean, with a quarry tiled floor and glass cased sensurround cabinets. It wasn't a garage, it was a bleeding laboratory.

"Jesus, Marty." I strolled over to a turret

lathe on its stand against the near wall, poking at the fresh swarf in the tray. Next to it was an industrial drill, six foot high with a wheel-down head. Behind me solid looking benching ran down the length of his garage, laden with tool racks and vices. There was also a tight roll of copper wire, a flat tray of big ball bearings, hefty stainless steel cylinders, circuit boards and transformers by the dozen.

"It's my project," Marty volunteered. "Magnetomechanics."

"Hence the motors?" I surmised.

"Uhuh."

"Marty, excuse me for asking, but what the hell is your project?"

He rocked a little from one foot to the other, and looked down at the washing machine. He must have come to a fairly swift decision, because he strode over to a glass cabinet above the workbench and took down what resembled an executive spinning top, flat and round and made of solid looking brass. He stood it on the benchtop, picked up a TV remote control with the other hand, and pushed a button: Hummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm...

I stood and watched as the top picked up speed. Marty took his finger off it, letting it wander around on the bench. Then he looked to his TV remote and pressed + *VOLUME*. The top grew noisier, rotating like a turbine and moving around in slow sweeping circles.

"I don't know if you know," he said, his tongue peeping out of the corner of his mouth. "But there's a quantum effect that makes a gyroscope fractionally lighter when it's spinning."

I shrugged, because I didn't. "Aw, my physics stopped at A level, Marty. Angular momentum and precession is about my limit."

"Right on. The angular momentum means it won't fall over. Makes it precess instead, lolling around like that. Now watch this."

I looked over his shoulder, and saw him dabbing at the contrast button, all the while aiming his remote at the humming brass top. Another hum grew in pitch on top of the one already going.

I snapped my fingers. "You've got a second motor inside?"

"Uh huh, on the spindle at right angles. And there's another one mounted on that. Nickel Cadmium batteries."

"Neat," I said.

"The thing is that the quantum effect gets cubed up with the angular momentum." Marty was pressing his remote again. "If the speed is high enough it won't only not fall over. It won't even fall down."

I guess I looked kind of blank.

Marty smiled at me. "The apparent mass

goes negative on one or more vectors and ..."

## CLANG

Suddenly the spinning top was clambering against the brickwork above the garage door. It showered sparks, made a grinding sound, and leapt towards us.

I was asleep in bed, very comfortable thank you. Then I realised that the mattress was hard and polished. Red terracotta tiles. And the walls were white.

"Rick!" It was Marty, standing over me looking aghast, the heavy brass top in his hand. It had hit me on the forehead. "Are you alright?"

He babbed on about the earth turning away from the gyroscope which stayed where it was. But I wasn't really listening. All I could think about was the bright green neon sign in my mind's eye.

*flash ANTIGRAVITY flash*, it flashed.

**I** stood in line waiting patiently behind some dude depositing a zillion cheques that made up his firm's takings. I passed the time idly looking up at the video cameras and the posters marketing the flavour of the month plastic. It was ten past four on Monday afternoon, and I'd got off work early.

I felt bad about the cheque I'd just written out, because I hadn't discussed it with Sarah. Since Kirstie had started going to nursery Sarah had managed to get a part time job with London & Mutual, and what with the mortgage rate down we'd been able to put a few bob away.

"Next, please."

I looked up at the cashier frowning behind her plate glass window. She was frowning at me. I stepped forward.

The cashier took my cheque, frowned even more, and eyed me like I was a rapist in a lineup. Then she clucked, and went to find the manager.

Ho hum. I waited. It was rather a lot of money. One thousand two hundred and seventeen pounds, our life savings. But needs must. After Marty's demonstration in his garage he and I had had a little chat ..

"How would you like it, Mr Clifford?"

I looked hard and level at the cashier.

"Fivers," I said.

**A** week later I walked up the hill from the station and kept going past Wisteria Drive on to Ladywood.

Marty had the garage door up, and an odour of hot metal tanged my nose. As I approached I saw him squatting with his back to me, blue sparks lighting up the white painted walls. He was welding.

"How goes it Marty?"

He lifted his visor and shut off the current.

"Great! It's been a bit tricky getting the weight distribution right, but that wheel balancer has been just perfect."

The wheel balancer was something I'd been able to pick up cheap from Kwik-Fit. It squatted beyond the bonnet of my car next to the gas bottles and the tyres.

"Don't worry," Marty reassured me, giving the Quattro a friendly pat. "I can put it all back together again afterwards."

I never did explain why Marty was so keen on my old washing machine did I? I'd got him three more from the gypsies. The project involved fitting an electric motor inside each one, across the drum, the electric current being fed through insulated copper bars inset into the spindle.

Marty had rigged up steel bracing and a commutator brush arrangement that was

repeated where the washing machines were welded onto the axle wheels of the car.

"It's looking good, Marty. You want me to do some more machining?"

"Naw, I did the secondary bearings this afternoon. Tell you what though, you could get me some capacitors and things from the Radio Shack. Here's a list, they're open until six."

"No problem, Marty," I said turning to get to it. "Just one thing, though."

"Yes?"

"When you've finished welding could you close the garage door down?"

"Sure, Rick."

I was a little concerned about the car being seen. Not just by my wife, but also by Mike Davies, the personnel manager at work. He lived down in London, but his daughter's house was somewhere round here. He just might come along and recognise the number plate.

After all, it was a company car.

**T**he second mortgage had been a drag, but after all patent applications are expensive. A patent is like a hot brown steamy one covered with fat black pinstripe brownflies lapping and sucking and saying things like *asset protection* and *tort*. But still, it was all going to be worthwhile, because today was the big day.

We'd picked a weekend, aiming to hit the Sunday papers. The plan was to cruise along and catch a few eyes, and maybe drop in on Trafalgar Square for lunch.

"Fuel?" Marty said.

"Check." I answered.

"Oxygen?"

"Check."

"Battery?"





"Check."

"Autofeedback?"

"Check."

We sat in the front seats side by side going through the list. Marty was going to do the driving, and I was the navigator. The dashboard sported an altimeter plugged into the cigarette lighter, and the steering column now moved up and down. A head-up array of LEDs and liquid crystal gauges were superglued onto Marty's sun visor, and I had my own cluster of dials and meters bolted on a rack where the glove compartment used to be.

Naturally the Quattro was supported on bricks, and the garage door was up. We'd had a little trouble getting the guy opposite to move his van, and the ruckus had attracted a bit of attention.

Thus I wound my window down: "Everybody stand back," I shouted.

Marty's Ma shooed some kids away from the bottom of the drive, the next door neighbours retreated to the safety of their lawn, and the gypsies in their vulture scrapmobile backed up the road a little.

"All systems check," Marty said "A-OK."

"Countdown commencing." I raised my watch. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

"SIX, FIVE, FOUR, THREE..." the children chanted gleefully.

"Two, One, Zero," Marty and I said together.

Marty turned the key.

*Hurhurhurhur ...* said the starter motor.

*BrooOOOM!*

"We have ignition." Marty clutched the wheel.

"Voltage feed at maximum." I announced.

"Drum motors on." Marty flicked the windscreen wipers switch. Naturally the wipers didn't even twitch. Instead a turbine hum

began low on the scale.

"Power holding," I called.

"Zanussi motors on." Marty flicked the windscreen wipers up to fast. Another rising hum laid itself on top of the first. "Here goes."

I held my breath as Marty found first gear and let out the clutch. A third hum started. There was an initial rocking and then a feeling of tight well balanced weight as Marty slowly pressed his foot down on the accelerator. The engine note climbed.

"Revs 613 and 107," I read from my dials.

"Slight retard on the offside Zanussi. Autofeedback picking up. 968 and 184, even stevens on all corners."

"Handbrake off," Marty instructed.

I let it out, hearing the anchor chain clink to the floor beneath us.

"Road speed 80 kilometres an hour," Marty read from the speedo.

"Wheel revs seven twenty, seven sixty, eight hundred," I called. "Zanussi revs four oh seven. Power holding. Drum revs twelve eighty. Cube revs seven times ten to the eight. Ten to the nine."

I was starting to shout above the engine roar. The roar rose higher as the rev counters climbed. Something shifted.

"We have lift off!" Marty yelled. He pulled back the wheel, the engine roar turned into a scream ...

*CLANG!!!*

We shot forward leaving the garage door crashing wildly. We cleared the hedge over the road and took the top off a garden shed.

"Fuck-in-ell," I said, hanging on to the seat belt as the houses and trees whipped by at shoulder level.

"It fucking works, Rick!"

"Hey, Marty, there's the M25." It was a piece of flat level ground. "Over that away."

"Let's give 'em something to look at." Marty said. With that he took us sweeping over the fields, swinging the wheel to bring us banking down the embankment above the traffic. He carefully descended until we were about two feet off the road surface, a nice distance from the car in front.

"Watch out, Marty," I said looking into my wing mirror. "There's some guy tonning up behind us."

"Huh, it's a Cosworth. I hate Cosworths." Marty held steady in the outside lane as the Cosworth hauled up onto our tail, jinking from side to side and flashing his headlights hard.

"He hasn't noticed," I could see the guy mouthing and swearing for us to get out of his way.

"Bloody roadhog." Marty tsked and pulled back the wheel.

We gently rose ten foot up from the road surface, and stayed there, maintaining a steady ninety. The Cosworth driver didn't bat an eyelid, he just burned rubber as he shot beneath us and receded into the distance ... under the bridge.

"MARTY THE BRIDGE!"

WHAAAR! the engine screamed and my butt pressed into the seat as the Quattro went into a power climb. We just missed punctuating a furniture van heading north on the A1.

"Sorry, I panicked," Marty said. "Let's do the speed test at altitude huh?"

"Good idea. Go for the Thames, it's about fifteen miles. I'll time us and work it out later."

Marty took us up to ten thousand feet, swung back round over the thin white ribbon of the M25 far below, and put his foot down. Our speed picked up, you could tell from the air roaring by outside the win-





"I got it I got it!" I shouted, dragging it out from under my seat.

I pointed at it, adjusted the focus, pressed the shutter and got a red light. So I adjusted the exposure and ...

### GONE

The saucer just kicked away at right angles and was a vanishing dot just like that.

"Did you get it? Did you get it?"

"Ummm." I said.

Maybe it wasn't me pointing the camera that made them take off. Because just then a shadow fell across us and we looked up to see an RAF Tornado wagging its wings. The pilot was staring at us, his eyes wide behind his mask. He looked over his shoulder to his navigator and they gesticulated wildly.

"Hey, they're waving," Marty said.

"No Marty," I said. Because the gauntleted finger stabbing towards the ground was awfully similar to the time I got pulled over and breathalysed.

"Oh," Marty said. He pushed gently on the steering wheel. We started down, down, down...

The only problem was that Brize Norton was some way away, and the Quattro only did about thirty to the gallon. By the time the Tornado had shepherded us

into sight of the runway the petrol was redlining and we were thinking of putting down and legging it.

We were over the landing lights when the engine coughed and died. I clutched my seat belt and started to pray.

"We're on battery power now," Marty said.

At the amperage the motors drew we had only sixty seconds running time.

"Come on, Marty," I gulped, watching the needle swinging down towards zero.

"Hang on in there," Marty gripped the wheel.

The runway was beneath us now, the stripes flicking past at a terrific speed. That concrete looked hard.

"We're going in," Marty pumped the brakes, we rocked and stalled.

"Marty, the battery's flat!" I yelled.

The humming of our Zanussis started to fall down the scale. We were twenty feet up, coming to the terminal buildings. Fifteen feet:

*Huumhuumhuumhummm...*

Ten feet.

*Mmuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu...*

Five feet.

*Ohmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm...*

Jesus, it was one rough landing.  
*CLANG-A-CLANG-A-CLANG-A-CLANG-A-CLANG-LANG-A-CLANG.*

**I** think there would have been an endorsement on the pilot's licence, but since Marty didn't even have a *driving* licence it was rather academic.

You should have seen the ground crews clustered around the Quattro.

The off-duty flyers were damn near fighting to sit inside. Our pilot came over out of his Tornado and was suitably agog. He told us he thought we were some kind of new fangled jet copter pulling a stunt, top-ho, and couldn't quite believe it when he crawled underneath and saw we didn't have a turbine in the floorpan.

Then the Military Police were called out with tarps and dayglo plastic strip to keep everybody back, and the base commander turned up with a gaggle of brass. They were sceptical at first. Until Marty checked things over, pronounced the car drivable, and somebody went and got a can of petrol.

So everything worked out alright in the end. The patent pending got rushed through pretty damn smart, and the Harewell science budget got a turboboost. They're working on miniaturisation to the molecular level now. Marty told me he and the team have almost perfected a neat black box about the size of a tea chest that's going to revolutionise everything from golf carts to jumbo jets.

So, as I sit here beside my pool I can safely say things are looking up. Sarah loves the new house, and appreciates the extra time my Department of Transport consultancy job gives me. I don't need the money of course, nor does Marty, because our royalty cheques are more than enough. In fact we're thinking of jacking it all in and going freelance again.

You see, we've got a project of our own going, one we keep quiet about. Just like we kept quiet about that UFO we saw. We reckon that if anything could shoot off like that thing did, it must be capable of infinite acceleration. And if it can do that, it can probably travel faster than light.

The thing that really interests you see, was that apart from the dome on top, the UFO was most definitely *spinning* ...



## JOHN DUFFIELD

John Duffield is 35, work in computers, and lives with his wife, and two children in Hertford. He learned the writing ropes running a postal storyswapping group called the Writers' Bootstrap, and remains a member of the Cassandra Writers' Workshop to keep his hand in. He nowadays serves as a reader for *New Moon* magazine.

dows.

"I'll change up now into second," he shouted.

Our speed picked up even more. And more. By the time we were in fifth the ground was really sliding by and the noise was deafening. We were still accelerating when I heard a creak.

"Marty, slow down. The windscreen can't take it."

"Oh shit. Can you smell burning?"

I looked out over the bonnet and saw the paint curling and frizzling.

"Jesus, we must be doing about five hundred. Christ, Marty, there's the Thames already. And Crystal Palace. And ... Eek!" I gulped. "Marty." I nudged him in the ribs.

"Whatsamatter, I'm slowing down, honest?"

"Marty, look."

He looked. He goggled.

Because fifty feet away pacing us on our nearside wing was a white metal disc about the size of a bungalow. The dome on the top had ports, and I could see faces looking out.

"The camera!" Marty yelled. "Where's the camera?"



# DOUBLE

# YEAR LOST

PETER HAMILTON

**S**harp flurries of hot November rain chased across Stone's wharfs as I loaded *Slowdancer's* bales of poly-grass seed. Most people scurried for cover under the branches of gene-tailored ash trees that grew around the edge of the semi-circular polyp basin. Me, I kept working. Nottingham and Catherine were fifty-five miles away at the end of the Trent and Mersey canal. If *Slowdancer* left by noon, we'd be there by tomorrow morning, my berth paid for by the graft of loading.

I'm not really sure why I kept up the drifter persona after my contract with the Warren ran out. I had enough money now to buy stability, respectability even. I suppose because it was effortless, I'd been drifting for the past five years.

There were plenty of us doing it. Mid teens kids, disfranchised, bored with our rigidly orthodox communes, coop farms, cults, city zones; blued out by the Rose parties and their ever more desperate attempts to register voters. The country was alive with different cultures and ideologies. Somewhere, there was bound to be one that suited. It was just a question of looking.

Now I'd found part of what I was looking for. Catherine. Found her in the oddest place, a set of second hand memories.

Halsen, *Slowdancer's* owner, stood on deck catching the bales I slung up at him, stacking them in the forward two holds with an ease and tidiness which betrayed a lifetime's experience. The barge was twenty yards long, six broad, her structure painted a glossy navy blue with fancy scarlet and yellow trim. Her bioware was standard: sub-sentient processor array, nutrient system in the bilges, eight snail-consanguineous skirts along the portside, and twelve on the bottom of the hull. I could see the portside skirts, glistening blue-green bulbs a yard in diameter, just below the gunwale, sticking to the wharf like limpets.

She was an elegant craft; been in the family for three generations, Halsen told me. He was a nice old boy in his late fifties, about five foot two; UV-proofing had tinted his skin a muddy-bronze.

We finished the loading just after twelve. Halsen's wife, Lori, had finished filling up *Slowdancer's* nutrient reserve bladders from the dock arteries. Lori was a doll, twenty-three, a couple of years older than me, and standing a good seven inches taller than her husband. UV-proofing gave her dark ebony skin a lustrous glimmer.

For all their disparity, their relationship seemed successful enough. The first thing Lori did was invite me into the little aft cabin to look at baby Andria. Three months old, and sleeping blissfully under a lacy Victorian canopy.

*Slowdancer* cast off, her hull-bottom skirts gurgling softly as they slid us across the bed of the shallow basin. Halsen's eyes

were closed as he used his affinity bond with the barge's processors to steer us towards the deeper water of the canal.

"I always relish this moment," Lori said. "Moving on. It gives me a sensation of security. You understand? Docks are an interruption to our life."

*Slowdancer* dipped down into the channel of the Trent and Mersey canal which bisected the crown of the basin, edging into the colourful stream of barge traffic heading towards Nottingham. As the draught grew, Halsen angled us in towards the smooth pearl-white polyp wall rising out of the southern end of the basin.

The portside skirts flared out and stuck to the near-vertical surface of the wall as the canal bed fell away. *Slowdancer* began to accelerate until we reached the canal standard of three miles an hour.

"Catherine must be quite something," Lori ventured quietly. She was sitting on a carved bench just outside the cabin door; Halsen had his arm around her shoulders. I think she enjoyed the idea of a questing romantic. "A girl who can make a drifter come after her. How come you got split up?"

I settled on the decking, my back against the taffrail. "We didn't split. I've never actually met Catherine in the flesh."

"A girl you've heard about?" Her eyes lit with delight.

"Heard about, seen, smelt, touched. I have two sets of memories for the last twelve months. One of them belongs to Catherine's lover, ex-lover I should say. He deserted her."

"And you've fallen for her because of these recollections?" Halsen asked.

"Yes." How could I convey it? The blind animal longing for a girl who ghosts through my mind. I know how beautiful she is, how kind, tender. I know what makes her laugh, the same things that do me; what makes her sad. I know the foods she can't resist nibbling, the Sussex rose wine she adores. I know her vulnerabilities, her quiet admirable strengths.

I love her the way she loved him, and she doesn't even know I exist.

"Why did he do it?" Lori asked. "This man, Gilchrist, who left her. If she is so wonderful that even a memory can inflame you like this, why would he leave her?"

"He was acting out a fantasy. Because she was the right girl in the right place, at the right moment in his life, he deluded himself that he'd fallen in love with her. He hadn't, of course; he'd fallen in love with the ideal she represented. So when the time came to move on, he could override his pantomime *'til death do us part* schmatz. Just cut her out. Bang, no regrets, no remorse even. He was finished, so it was okay."

"And he really felt he had to move on so

badly?"

"Oh yes, that's the way his life is lived."

**G**ilchrist Augustine Philips-Calder. Note the name, because it's an old one; old name, old family, old money; pre-Warming. The only way he's survived so long is due to his wealth. He's a major shareholder in one of the orbital manufacturing companies. And contrary to the propaganda which The Church Of The Lord's Earth pumps out, the orbital manufacturers are the most consistently prosperous enterprises in existence.

Gilchrist's memories had an unbroken lineage stretching back over one hundred and fifty seven years, and thanks to his money they wore a twenty year old body. He was tall, broad shouldered, deep chested; a handsome face with a slightly flat nose. His eyes were grey, his short cut hair was chestnut, he dermal-tailored skin had come out a smooth olive-brown.

The girls adored him, and not just for his looks; some aspect of his time-refined personality seemed to hover around him. In a land swarming with the boringly phlegmatic, his urbane cosmopolitan style was unique. Small wonder they flocked to his bed.

He was drifting when he met Catherine. It was late last November, a place called Clumber Park, on the outskirts of Worksop. Clumber's old trees had been scorched out by the Warming - the pines, oaks, and sycamores - and replaced by gene-tailored varieties. The leaves are glossier, the bark darker, they thrive in the year-round heat and UV saturated sunlight.

It's the same the world over; we've spread a modified carpet of greenery across every continent, retaining shape but not intent. Their cells have an almost mechanical purpose spliced in. In another century they'll have replaced the ozone, reduced the carbon dioxide. The date seems to have been sequenced into people's DNA; we treat the interregnum like a long sunny winter, nothing gets done, there's no real progress, no technical nor social revolutions; we're marking time.

Gilchrist had been drawn to Clumber to recapture the full illusion of youth, of lazy days spent picknicking under mild blue skies. The park alluded to the twentieth century in its layout and atmosphere.

It was being used by the New Puritans for a fair. They're a countryside vagrant cult, whose code prohibits them to use bioware to enhance their bodies or brains. They've even got a special shielding gel they rub on so they don't need to be dermal-tailored against the UV.

The Park and the Puritans had a double appeal to Gilchrist. Both natural, or as near as you can get in the modern world. He felt



first hand. Occasionally I can animate the hulks with fragments of his earlier memories.

"So Gilchrist chatted her up?" Halson asked.

Our view of the powerstation was cut off by leafy willows. The canal was running through an avenue of them. Tall, sturdy trees, with thick boughs curving over the water, they'd obviously been trained, coiling round each other like wrestling snakes at the apex, near-solid arches.

"Nothing so obvious," I said. And laughed, not out of respect, but forced admiration. "He kept going back, telling her snippets of his life. Well, the drifter life he'd assumed. He'd been a drifter before; it wasn't a problem for him."

"And she swallowed it?"

"Yeah. The fair lasted a week; Catherine spent the last two days doing nothing but

listening to him. The door into everything she'd ever wondered about."

Lori turned from the green wall enclosing *Slowdancer*. "What about you? Where were you when all this was happening?"

"Last November? I was getting close to Saturn."

**I**t was a sensorium memory. There had been a probe exploring Saturn, forty years ago. Gilchrist and his associates sent it prospecting. A real long term venture for them. It'll be centuries before we get out to Saturn at any sort of meaningful level. But then, I suppose centuries are the sort of terms people like Gilchrist think in.

The probe's optronics gave me a high-definition image of the gas giant's cloudscape, capturing the bland brown and yellow storm bands, the pale saffron ribbon around the equator. Both polar regions were uniformly dull, although I could bleed in false-colour definition if I wanted. I'd tried it once, but the result was too artificial, as though some child had been let loose with primary crayons.

Encounter phase. Starting close enough for the ring system's concentric ribbons to appear grooved, then slowly resolving into their myriad component ringlets, non-dimensional threads of light. With the magboom cut in. I could see the colossal energies seething through them, thickly braided streamers of pink and blue fogs, generated by interaction with the planetary magnetic field.

I'd never ever been abroad before, and now I was being overloaded by silent cosmic wonders. That identical bewitchment Catherine had felt in Gilchrist's presence.

Even knowing the fallibility of such fascination, I don't think either of us would've abdicated the past year, despite the heart-break which lay waiting at its end.

Some core segment of my personality had already accepted that I would never drift again. Not after this, flitting effortlessly between worlds. Trudging over a few miles of neolithic earth in the hope of encountering an acceptable sociological nexus was profoundly petty. A child's wish, there'll be someone out there who'll welcome you with open arms.

That year I grew up in classic style. Taking a long trip, an experience to broaden the mind. Even from my lofty synthetic Olympus I thought that was funny. How much further out could you get, how much wiser?

**W**e passed through Fradley junction after dark. It was another big polyp basin, where the Coventry canal joins the Trent and Mersey. *Slowdancer* rose out of the canal on her hull-bottom skirts, turning left and slotting into the orderly circular progression of barges.

Voices spilled out of the night, quiet private talk, amplified by the stillness. Fradley, at least, maintained the image of grand structure, of purpose; the canals giving lie to a cohesive country, disowning the sameness of scrupulous difference practised beyond the water.

"Space really changed you, didn't it?" Halson asked.

"Yeah, you wouldn't believe how matchless it is. No alternative, you've got to receive the memory firsthand to understand."

"That's good."

"Why do you say that?"

"You'll have something if she rejects you."

I tried to imagine that. Failed. It was a null zone, one whose edges were painful to probe. "You think she might?"

"Dunno. This is all beyond me. I can't think how I'd react if some woman turned up with the memories of one of my former lovers, professing undying love. Maybe the New Puritans are right to keep their minds free of contamination, after all. We don't seem to be doing so good out of it. Take Gilchrist, does bioware serve him, or him it? That's the measure of technology, it ought to exist to lighten life's load."

"If you're asking does it make him happy, then the answer is yes."

**G**ilchrist's happiness gathered cohesion all throughout that long week in Clumber Park, a function of expectation. Catherine was his grand prize, a sketch of total normality. The other player in his quintessential boy-meets-girl opera. A first love idyll that would rejuvenate the dreadfully jaded soul inside the youthful body. He could shadow the unique sweetness she'd experience, savouring it all year long, an emotional parasite.

She never knew how calculated his moves were. I could see the trust she placed in him, the value in which she held his words. At nights I would lie awake watching her succumb.

I remember her face, not beautiful, but pretty, a long nose, narrow eyes, thin lips. Looking through Gilchrist's eyes I can see the interest he awakens, the delight, the insidious growth of dependence.

They walk together through the park, skirting the lake, finding the small mock-Hellenic temple opposite the ruined Chris-

curiously at home mingling among them.

Trading was brisk; Puritans don't limit themselves to handicraft. Gilchrist saw plenty of bioware, simple units like water cordiators, liquor glands, and cotton spiders. They were mixed among the carvings, and carpets, and pottery, and refurbished hardware modules. Any gypsy from the last five centuries would've felt perfectly at home with the loud bustle and colour clashes.

Gilchrist's first sight of Catherine was against a backdrop of purple flowing rhododendrons that ringed the fair's glade, standing behind a stall at the side of her family caravan. The girl looked like she'd been stretched to her present height; she was tall and wafer thin, with wide bony shoulders, but her legs were sensational. He reckoned her age at around seventeen or eighteen. She was wearing a white cheesecloth dress, with long puffy sleeves, and a skirt which swirled just above her knees. Thick, boldly ruffled, raven black hair hung below her shoulderblades, a red leather band keeping windtugged strands out of her hazel eyes.

An unsullied girl, straight out of his youth. He walked over and bought a beer.

**F**our hours after we left Stone, *Slowdancer* was passing Rugeley. The bleached concrete cooling towers of the town's antique powerstation had begun to decay; cracks were multiplying, the constructions were buckling, leaning.

Lori watched the mid-industrial epoch relics slide by. Quiet and contemplative; it's an age which exerts a dark fascination on all of us. Junk consumerism gone mad. Fast and exciting, though. Gilchrist knew,



tian chapel. A perfect setting for young lovers; the rain has left it clean and shining, droplets refracting a multitude of rainbow coronas.

I can feel the warmth of her hand in his, squeezing firmly as if she's afraid he'll break free. There's her high voice confiding childhood's secrets and more recent ambitions. Cautious at first, eyes alert for his mockery.

Then his thorax grumbles softly, and I hear his murmurs of encouragement, dredging up or inventing similar incidents of his own youth. Never telling her how far away they are. Each one superbly timed, reinforcing the bond of apparent similarity.

Bastard. A puppet master. Unequaled. His eyes lingering on her breasts and legs. His heart quickening with excitement, a dryness in his throat, warmth in his belly. He's so sure.

And all the time she falls deeper. She can't see it. Nobody could, he's that good. Even her parents take a shine to him.

When the New Puritans disperse, Gilchrist and Catherine are left behind in the centre of an empty glade of solemn elms and gilded gorse.

**I** rolled out my sleeping bag on *Slowdancer's* deck around eleven o'clock. We were passing through Burton on Trent, not that there was much to see. Rectangles of light, and dark geometric shadows silhouetted against a nebulous horizon. The town had pretty much shut down for the night.

I couldn't sleep, muscles knotted with high voltage dubiety, waiting for morning. I lay on my back. The sky was clear, leaving the Halo visible, a thin hoary arc stretching across the southern sky. Hazy tonight, there must've been a lot of high-altitude vapour. It isn't a patch on Saturn's rings, but as an inspiration for poets, dreamers and lovers, it's unrivalled.

The Americans and Russians started it seventy years ago; thumping asteroids into Earth orbit with nukes, then fragmenting them into big chunks. They counted on the Kessler Syndrome to carry it from there.

The Kessler Syndrome: pack enough of those rock chunks in one orbit and engineer a collision between two; it'll produce a hornet swarm of gravel and boulders, triggering a cascade of secondary collisions. Once it starts it's a chain reaction. Unstoppable.

Theory had the original chunks being pulverised into sand, producing a broad, high-albedo shield, cutting down the solar infall. It was supposed to kill the Warming dead in its tracks.

They abandoned it fifty-five years ago. There were multiple factors - the Currency Fold, Gulf Deluge, rickety central governments, but mainly it was the plants. Gene-tailoring had come into its own, and seeds were both cheap and self-replicating. They were an answer people could understand, blossoming all around them, seen to be working; not some remote macro-project solution. Earth's last space programme went the way of all the others. Flawed by bright brash optimism, shot down by politicians.

It's starting to break up now. Tides generating small whirlpool accretions of particles, which grow larger with each year. Solar wind blowing the dust motes out into interplanetary space.

The Halo hung low above Burton-on-

Trent, a handle you could lift the Earth with. It reminded me of the irregular F-ring.

**T**he probe sank in towards Saturn, passing three hundred thousand kilometres inside Titan. I had the impression of a ball of amber mist hovering in space; the smoothness seemed malleable somehow. I wanted to reach out and stroke it, make it mine.

Was that why Gilchrist had sent the probe? Did he hold ambitions of terraforming it? The right elements were there, frozen - nitrogen in the atmosphere, ice in the rings - waiting for technology and determination to thaw them out, fuse them. My generation doesn't have that kind of self-belief. But Gilchrist, victor from an age where problems were solvable, he'd be drawn to the challenge. And he practised eternal patience, biding his time until his era returned.

I watched Titan fall behind, strangely attracted to the thought of what could be. My mind was free to roam, speculating, wishing with an uninhabited freshness I hadn't exercised since I was a child. It was all part of the voyager's magic. Out here nothing was impossible.

Approach phase. Months spent watching the planet expanding to dominate the probe optronics. With the particle sensors linked in I can feel the storm of ions sweeping out from the rings.

The electric breeze blows straight at me as I cruise inwards, swinging round towards the penumbra. Rings shimmer with auroral phosphorescence, starlight twinkling through. If I had eyes, I would cry.

**T**he Halo above Clumber Park that first night was radiant with reflected moonlight. It was intense enough to dapple the grass on the floor of the glade, silver beams streaming through the leaves.

I remember how it painted Catherine's pale skin with a platinum sheen. A gossamer silvan creature lying on Gilchrist's air-mattress under the open night sky, shivering in delight beneath his skilful tender fingertips.

It was so grossly unfair. Sex with Gilchrist was exquisite. It couldn't be anything else. A hundred and fifty seven years of experience, guile, and cunning, put into practise with all the vitality which came with a twenty-one year old body.

I try and forget, to smother it in a crust of guilt and shame. But it's a temptation beyond my strength. I keep returning to spy on her. Safe in the heart of the forest, uninhibited, alone with her diabolically talented lover.

I can feel his lips parting in a triumphant smile. She doesn't recognise it for what it is. Never guessing that her orgasm is a forgery, that it is simply a chapter in his Grand Romance. For it is a beautiful forgery, far superior to any original masterpiece. But, still, a forgery.

"Tea?" Lori asked.

I blinked awake. I'd missed the dawn. The Halo was a suggestion of a line in the pink watercolour sky. Venus stared out of the horizon. Tranquility was organic to the scene.

Lori stood over me, wearing a brown chunky wool sweater with worn elbows, and baggy olive-green trousers tucked into suede boots. First light had brought a wash of cool air with it, everything was coated in

dew, even my sleeping bag. Her eyebrows arched inquiringly; there was a mug in her hand, steaming. The brew smelt slightly minty.

"Sure," I croaked. I must've looked wrecked.

She smiled, a quick flicker of ivory teeth. "Two hours, and we'll be in Nottingham."

"Great." I struggled to a sitting position, and accepted the mug.

Lori pushed her hands in her trouser pockets and inhaled loudly, looking about. "Good day to be alive. Good omen."

"I hope so."

"Catherine really means that much to you?"

I ducked a nod and drank some more of the tea. Hot and bitter, just right. "You think I'm crazy?"

"No." She shook her head, then sat next to me, looking out over the prow. "This devotion of yours. No girl is going to walk past that without a glance. I didn't."

"Halsen?"

"That's right." She hugged her legs, smiling secretively. "I was drifting, just like you. Came on board *Slowdancer* at Skipton, on the Leeds and Liverpool canal. He said he wouldn't let me off till we were married. Didn't either." Her eyes met mine, shining bright. She shrugged ruefully. "Small story. Lacks encouragement. Sorry."

"Nice ending, though. That's what counts."

"Yeah. At least we wound up with Andria. It doesn't come much better."

"But Gilchrist dropped her from such a high place, Lori. I guess I'm a little bit frightened what I'm going to find. The shock of me appearing so soon after him. Catherine is hardly likely to be objective about me. It's scary, instinct is going to rule. She might not give me a chance to explain. That's all I want, just to talk to her, to set the record straight."

Lori looked back down the river. "We all of us have our heart broken sometime. It hurts, hurts bad when it happens, but it isn't lethal. In the long run it even helps. She's young, she'll do all right."

"But she knows nothing that good will ever happen again. And the trouble is, she's right. While they were together, it was magnificent. I've lived through each one of those days they had, and I can't match Gilchrist. Education, class, style, humour, wisdom, he's got them all, they're intrinsic."

"You've got something he hasn't. Most important of all."

"What?"

"Honesty."

**G**ilchrist was clever taking Catherine to a city. She'd visited before, of course, dived in, skipped through markets and shops, then dived out before nightfall. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating. But the point is, she didn't know the flip-side, didn't even know it existed. To her, city houses were New Puritan caravans which didn't move.

Gilchrist changed that, he gave her the diversity, the pace, the electric colours, the vices. Supported her through the giddiness as her senses were swamped by the intricacies and differences and dangers. He *changed* her. Inwardly, her perception, her outlook, was gradually warped away from that delighted acceptance of everything life threw at her. He taught her to rec-





ognise the shifty black currents below the thriving surface, the necromantic network of oiled politicians, traders and bureaucrats which branched down every street.

Even after that. After she'd learnt cynicism, and shrewdness, and self interest. After the roughcut country girl had been laid to rest. I still loved her. So did Gilchrist. She'd matured, blossomed, acquired poise and elegance, a hint of devilment. She was complete.

They set up home in a converted bookshop on the second floor of what used to be an arcade of exclusive shops. The long main room had a plate glass frontage, looking out over the arcade's mock-Edwardian interior. Catherine filled it with big potted palms and Indian rugs and cane chairs; covered its bare plaster walls with charcoal prints of extinct animals, a long frieze of animated foxes and badgers and robins.

There was a storeroom at the back, with a tall vaulting window that gave the briefest glimpse of the river Trent to anyone standing on tiptoe. Gilchrist put their bed in there, king sized, with a battered tubular brass headboard. They'd wait until midnight, then make love for hours under the open window, letting the cool night air flow over their entangled bodies.

Catherine was slow to adapt to permanency. Gilchrist often watched her packing everything neatly away at the end of the day, ready to move on. Habit dying hard. She had to get used to neighbours, to people who didn't vanish after a few fleeting hours. Friends. It was all so new and bold and exciting.

Gilchrist did what he does best, dealing, shuffling gear and knowledge. He established himself cautiously, developing contacts, dropping money in the right places. A fun game, a maestro running rings around first year apprentices. Winning, always winning. With a reverent Catherine at his side, high on the spice of exotica only he could provide.

**W**hile Gilchrist was consolidating his reign in Nottingham, the probe was gliding in towards Saturn.

Flyby phase. And I'm streaking into the penumbra, the ionosphere only five thousand miles below me. Continent-wide lightning webs sizzle across the dusky night-side cloudscape, terrifying wavefronts of white, purple-white, and blue-white discharges riding the pinnacles of supersonic typhoons, melding and ebbing.

It's a supreme vindication of Gilchrist's probe. Saturn is rich beyond my generation's comprehension. Metal, water, minerals, energy, planets, it has them all within its gravity empire. One day he'll see all this with his eyes. His destiny, I suppose. The future belonging to the past. Humiliation stabs at me. Catherine, all the Warmed Earth can offer; ephemeral, entertaining diversions to tide him over the current lull. Hibernation fodder.

Closest approach. Transiting the ecliptic, a thousand miles above the ionosphere. The midnight equator is alive with light. Here, at the bottom of the rings and the extremity of the atmosphere, a necklace of shooting stars wraps the world. Ring particles in their death throes, dragged down from their precarious orbit by atmospheric friction, engulfed within coronas of dazzling plasma. They descend in long decay-curves which end in spectacular disinte-

grations, debris plumes expanding like photonic flower buds. I listen to their dying screams over the radiobands, plasma emissions blasting apart the fragile silence of the empty interplanetary medium.

Slingshot. Slaloming round the gas giant's back. So low, so fast, details dissolve into carnival ride streaks. Round and up, flung away. The receding image suturing my gaps in human nature. Understanding Gilchrist's motivations, his drives. Divined from the splinters of insight I've gained from his mind. Without him, I would've drifted for the rest of my life, no matter where I'd settled. He's given me Catherine. Twice.

Saturn and all its sublime glory vanishes into night.

**N**ottingham's outskirts sailed past *Slowdancer*. Old brick and concrete buildings mottled by the harlequin scales of modern life's necessities, the black squares of solar panels, translucent emerald heart-shaped precipitator leaves.

"I'm taking *Slowdancer* down the Grand Union canal to Leicester," said Halson. "Got a cargo of powerspheres to load once we get shot of the seed bales. So we won't be leaving until this evening. There's a berth for you, if things don't work out between you and your lady."

"Thanks, but however it turns out, Catherine and I aren't going to settle this in a day." Even through the growing dread I could work that out.

Halson shrugged lightly. "Okay."

I'd been slumped on the prow all morning, staring ahead, watching Nottingham saddle the rucked skyline. New city, new daydream: drifter philosophy. Each city is going to be the one that connects, each commune has the ideology you've been hunting.

**L**ast November it'd been Birmingham, a sprawl to rival either half of London. I'd worked round the fringes, picking up casual labour among the hundreds of orange groves dotted around the city. Open eyed for a coterie which suited my nature.

But there'd been nothing; the usual rag bag of cults eager to save my soul, communes keen to have my strength and youth toiling in their fields.

I was in a pub in Cannock, drinking away my disappointment, when Jilliane hooked me.

She was twenty-five, medium height, interesting oval face with bobbed ginger hair. Her clothes were smart and clean, brown leather jacket and black jeans, knee length boots. It wasn't the right pub for her,

full of drifters and grove pickers, sun-hardened empty faces and little money. But she marched in, a queen of poise, and went straight up to the bar, buying herself a lager topped before anyone could make a play. They tried anyway, the local struts and some of the drifters. She turned them down flat; sometimes she didn't even have to speak.

After her first drink she came over and sat next to me. It was kind of embarrassing, everyone looking at me, figuring what I'd got that they hadn't. I didn't know either.

I bought her another lager topped, which halved the number of shillings in my wallet. "Why me?" I asked.

She flashed me a roguish grin. I liked that, easygoing, but hard as iron underneath; I could tell that much.

"I have a proposition that might interest you," she said.

"I'm all yours."

"Not that. If I'd wanted you I would have had you by now."

I opened my mouth to protest innocence. No sound came out, she was right.

"You're quick. That's good," she said. "It's a job, pays well. Two thousand pounds a month. You interested?"

"I'm a drifter. What do I have to do?"

She sipped her drink, tiny beads of condensation rolling off the glass onto her hands. "Just enjoy yourself."

"Too good to be true. This kind of thing doesn't happen to me."

"I've recruited before. I recognise what my client wants. You fit the bill like your were born for it."

"Client?"

The challenge went out of her grin, becoming warmer, conspiratorial even. "My great great grandfather."





plained. "Perfect for us."

The crate was terraced with concentric balconies, like an amphitheatre, completely tiled in slabs of white marble. Two-hundred penthouse apartments stared out over the central pool with its fountains and statues and willow trees.

I was given a guest suite for the night; the most bioware intense environment I'd ever seen. The walls were polyp, inlaid with glowing lumstrips; furniture was pseudo-amorphous, jelly pillows which conformed to verbal orders; food and drink came direct from a secretor.

Jilliane turned up the next morning. She ordered a pillow into chair form and sat behind my table, placing a phone wafer on the steel-hard surface.

"We would like to hire your body for a year," she asked.

"To do what?"

"As a repository for someone else's thoughts."

"You mean affinity sensorium?" I'd heard of that, someone old, bedridden, seeing the world through another set of eyes, a youth's, mobile and vigorous. The thought left me feeling queasy; not that I would've minded acting as a highly-paid remote-tourist, not if seeing was all there was to it. But there'd be every sense and action involved - eating, peeing, farting, sex - all put on exhibition.

"No," said Jilliane. "The principle has been taken a stage further at the Warren. We're proposing a thoughtswap with my great great grandfather."

That cooled me. Thinking of a year spent prisoner in an emancipated incontinent body. Wondering just how far I'd go for the money. It's always an interesting question, in abstract. "Where is he?"

"I'm right below you," said a male voice from the wafer.

"Grandpa died seventy-two years ago," Jilliane said levelly. "His memories were translated directly into a bioware neural network."

"Bloody boring, though," said the voice. "You can only get so much entertainment from sensorium memories, they begin to pale after a time. I like to get out and about once in a while. It keeps me sane."

I looked at Jilliane in a daze. She nodded shortly.

"If you can afford all this, why not simply buy yourself a clone body?" I asked.

"This is the wrong world for me," said the voice. "It's stalled. There's no ambition out there, no interest in accomplishment. It's just a phase, a mass wintermind season. When it's over, when the ozone's back and England has snow again, then I'll come out

for good."

"And me?" I asked. "What would I do during this year?"

"We have a vast library of sensorium memories," said Jilliane. "You can indulge yourself in any way you like." There was a note in her voice, a twang of success. My question had been acceptance. She'd seen much more than build and youth in that Cannock pub. She'd seen I could handle the concept, someone so blued out with drifting they'd take the money as a cheap escape.

**N**ottingham's docks were similar to Stone's, but on a larger scale. Five of those big basins strung out in a line. Barge traffic was thick; wharfs piled high with cargoes; porters, captains, and merchants shouting gamely.

Halsen and Lori stood together on *Slow-dancer's* deck to say goodbye, holding each other close. Their faces said it all, long and uncertain, sorrow for the fool and his hopeless pursuit.

Hot humid air hangs cloyingly over the dock, rich with the smells of ripening food. I'm threading my way past giant pyramids of apples, a desperate tangle of exhilaration and qualms, focussed inwards.

All I have brought is questions, for Catherine, for myself. I say I love her, what if she asks me to give my body back to Gilchrist? Do I love her that much, or is it selfish love? A lust to relive the past year again and again, myself cast as a pale shadow of Gilchrist. Their time together was almost unbearably good, the mythical sanctum of fulfilment at the end of the drifter's road. The reason I started out.

I leave the bedlam of the docks behind me and set off towards the arcade, walking without hesitation down the familiar maze of streets which I've never seen before.

Soon now, soon I'll know. Catherine will show me my naked self. I'm afraid.



**T**he one regret I have in discovering Catherine is that last memory of her, the morning Gilchrist left. He just upped and walked out.

I can see his hand on the door of the bookstore; dull chrome metal, cold and hard in his palm. I can hear muffled sobbing from the storeroom. The door closes behind him, banishing the sound. Raffia blinds are drawn behind the plate glass windows, he walks away from them at a brisk pace. There's no looking back, not even a furtive flick of eyes to see if she's watching him.

He takes the steps of the iron staircase two at a time. His feet ringing with that peculiar dry echo which is the signature of the arcade's cavernous crystal roof.

Outside the gated entrance, pale orange sunlight is falling onto the damp pavement. There is ozone in the air from last night's thunderstorm. I sense it percolating into his bloodstream, invigorating him.

Still, he doesn't look back.

**J**illiane chattered spryly as she drove us out to the Warren, the first time I'd ever been in a power car. It wasn't a commune, she told me, it didn't have rules. More like a club, a country retreat. The only entrance qualification was wealth.

How much wealth, I didn't realise until we emerged from the picket of woodland which surrounded it. The protective band of spanish oaks enclosed a patch of meadowland over a mile wide, with a vast crater in the middle. Seven executive tilt-fans were parked around the edge. Camels grazed peacefully between them.

"It's an old granite quarry," Jilliane ex-

## PETER HAMILTON

Peter Hamilton has had short stories published in *Fear*, *The Gate*, *R.E.M.*, and *Dream/New Worlds*. He has also placed stories in *Dreams* anthology and *New Worlds*, both of which are due out in 1992. His first novel, "Mindstar Rising", a SF detective thriller will be published by PAN this year. He has just finished working on the sequel.

# SEE THOSE



by KEITH BROOKE

**T**he grey microbial scum that coated Vox's liver was never a good sign and Randal focused his being on the discoloured patches. His hands hovered over the vast organ and he hummed a liturgy to help direct his mind. It was difficult to focus, but Randal forced himself, drove himself on; soon time ceased to exist and he was racing through the channels of the Universal Mind, getting them into the necrotic areas of Vox's liver, driving out the genetic confusion that was rotting the organ from within.

Prelate Randal opened his eyes, closed them, re-opened them and forced them to bring Vox's sanctum into sharp relief. The grey scum still formed a discordant patch on the surface of the seventh lobe but the reading from the bioptic probe indicated the depth of Randal's faith: the necro-count was down point four and still dropping. Randal had a vision of the dead cells breaking into pieces and being carried off by countless hepatophages. He glanced at the monitor to see if this had registered with the Hep-Ex filter but there was nothing; it would be several minutes before the latest Healing showed up in Vox's blood.

Randal stepped back from the Hep-tank and lowered his shaking hands to his sides. Gradually he was returning to his surroundings, the psychic swirl releasing him back to his own perception of the Universal Mind. He dabbed at his moist brow with the wide collar of his cloak and then glanced across at the face of Vox. The Apostle of the Universal Mind was spread through the entire sanctum, his organs separated and nurtured by their attendant microbial hordes, but his face had been preserved as a single unit. His eyes were closed, his skin lax; the Apostle was sleeping.

Randal stepped closer, suppressing the wave of disquiet that always stole over him when he saw the face from any angle but the front; the back of Vox's head was absent, the brain smoothed out and fitted into a cerebronic microhabit. Vox's eyes snapped open and Randal lowered his head, clasped his hands together. "Voice of U.M., Link to the Heavens," mumbled the prelate, staring at where Vox's feet should have been. "Haloed by your name. Living as one, All ..."

"Brah!" Vox broke into Randal's liturgy. "Get me some food, man. I want to eat."

Randal looked up at Vox, read the familiar signs on the old man's face. The Apostle's spirits were always low if he was woken shortly after a Healing. Randal said, "It is an Aprille morning, my lord. Showers and ..."

"Get me food."

"... a little blue to the sky. The proles are working in the fields, the outlook is of a good year. The Mind is showing us the way." It was never wise to answer Vox's persistent complaints of hunger. His stomach had been removed many decades before and his blood was kept low in nutrients as part of his longevity programme; cellular hunger was a part of The Apostle's life, but no amount of explanation seemed to ease the condition. Randal resolved to pray more intently for Vox at evening congress.

The lines of tension had slid from Vox's face and Randal allowed a moment of silence to pass. The sanctum was a large room, easily twelve yards by eight, yet it was barely big enough to contain the various biological systems that were Vox. The light filtered down faintly from the shuttered windows set into the sloping ceiling and was augmented by a number of candles that flickered in private breezes.

"Holy Apostle of the Universal Mind," began Randal.

"Eh what?" Vox's gaze darted around the room and then settled once again on the prelate.

"May the mind lead us, through you," continued Randal. The face found its earlier laxity and Randal paused and licked his dry lips before an inner voice told him to continue. "A man has a son," he said, lapsing into the Universal Impersonal. "The son is bright, the Mind has found good expression through him, and the man prays each night that the boy will fill his father's shadow. When the boy reaches Age he enters directly into the novicehood and his father feels himself to be the proudest man alive." The old feelings came back to Randal and he took a deep breath to calm his raging pulse. Pride was a failure of expression, but the feelings had been good. "The boy does well and for two joyous years his future looks bright, then his grades suddenly drop, his attitudes shift. His father calls him to private trial and he finds that there is a girl involved, that the boy seems bewitched by her. The boy is angered by what he calls his father's intrusion and insists that he is still taking his AIDants; his father cannot believe that the medications would fail to suppress the baser urges but..."

"You're Cromwell, aren't you?" said Vox. "Layla's boy."

"Randal, my lord. Randal one point two four." For a moment the prelate was taken aback by the interruption, the apparent lack of interest in the problem with Randal's son, Lambert, but it was not unusual. The Apostle always took the oblique approach, never the direct; one of the high skills of the

prelacy was the interpretation of Vox's seemingly jumbled directions, dragging guidance out of the verbal ether.

"Oh. Randal." The face subsided again, but just as Randal was about to continue its eyes opened and Vox said, "Bring me a meal." Randal stared studiously at the cracks between the huge paving slabs at his feet. A red spider-mite disappeared into a gap in the mortar.

"The man," said Randal, "didn't want to press his son too far. These things can ..."

"When I was young," said Vox, "there was none of this." His look flicked jerkily around the room and then settled back on Randal. Vox's chin was highlighted by a fine mesh of spittle. "When I led The Awakening it was all ... the students were against us, did you know that? There was a girl, a pretty young thing with the dance in her eyes, she wanted to stop me. I said to the Chancellor, 'Bring her to me,' and they did, and ... and... you *do* look like Cromwell, you know."

"The girl?" prompted Randal.

"What girl, eh? What are you saying? I've had enough. Go away. *Leave me!*"

"The voice is the light that illuminates the way," mumbled Randal as he turned and left the sanctum, his mind churning over the various interpretations of The Apostle's message.

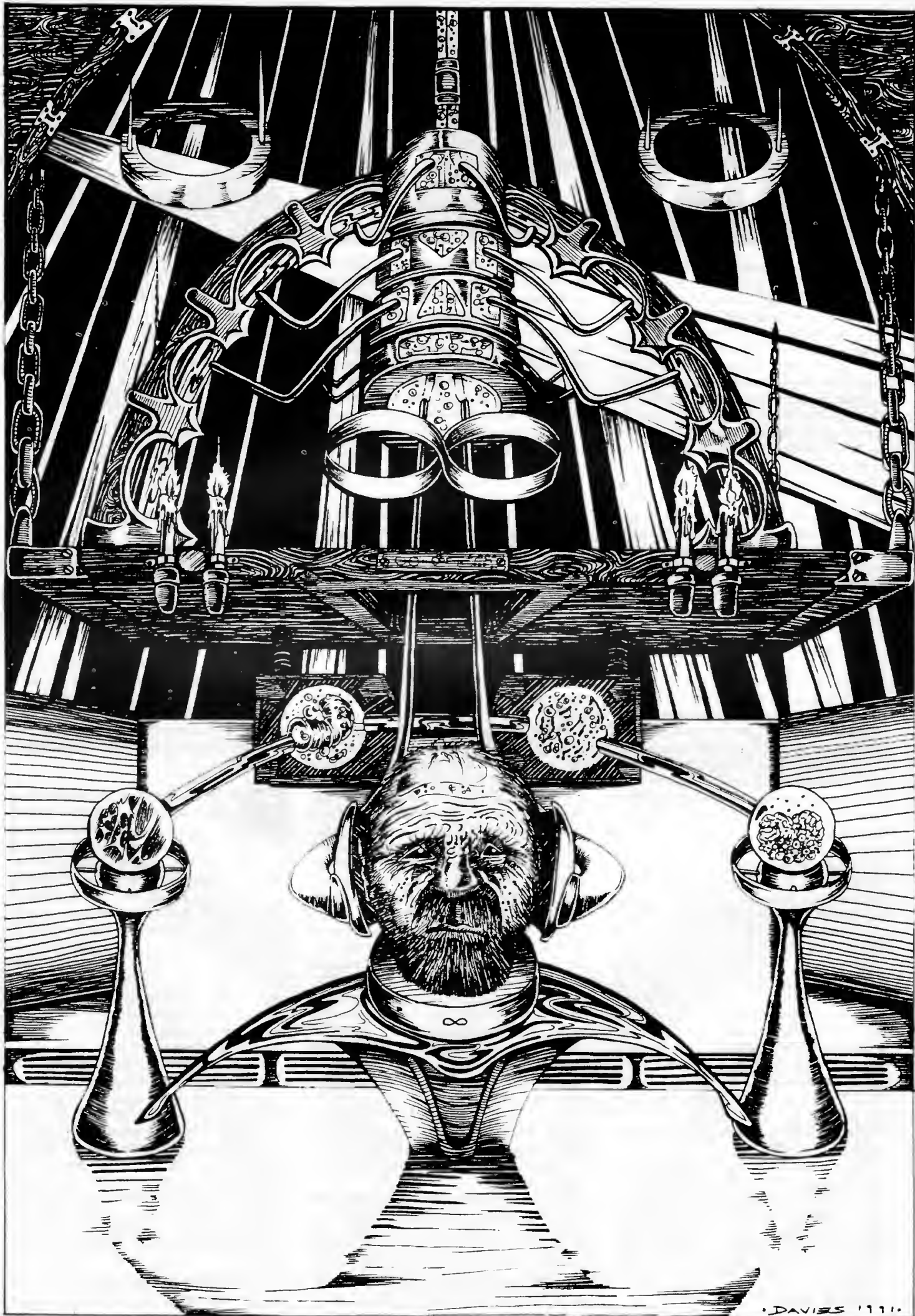
**T**he following morning Randal was scheduled for Vox's kidneys but he had tremendous trouble focussing his mind. He hung his hands over each of the seven bloated organs in turn in an unconscious effort to channel the Universal Mind but it was pointless, the dislocation of Healing never lost its transcendence. Sometimes it could be like that, but Randal had never felt so little control since his own novicehood. The bioptic probe on each kidney gave only a slight fluctuation as a result of the Healing, but Randal was relieved to note that the readings had already been high to begin with. Vox had been given a good set of kidneys.

There was the usual disorientation as Randal drifted back into his own world, and he noticed that Vox's eyes were open; the old man was watching him as he struggled free of his temporal confusion. Running a hand across his forehead, Randal stepped towards Vox's face, kept his eyes turned dutifully to the ground. "Voice of U.M., Link to the Heavens," mumbled Randal. "Ha -"

"Get me some food," said Vox. His dry, cracked tongue darted across his lips and a tic tugged twice at his right eyelid. "I want a meal."

"It is a fine Aprille morning, my lord. The sun shines and a light breeze tests the





newly emerged crops. The outlook is that of a good year. The Mind is showing us the way." Randal watched the flame of a candle playing in a dark corner; from some reason he found that he could not directly meet The Apostle's pale blue eyes. "Holy Apostle of the Universal Mind," he said. "May the Mind lead us through you." He paused, licked his lips, then: "The man followed your guidance, my lord. The girl waits outside." "Eh what?" said Vox. "You're Cromwell, aren't you?"

Sometimes Vox's instructions were difficult to follow, but Randal took this to be a clear reference to their meeting the previous day. *I remember clearly, let's get on*, the message said. Randal called for the girl. There had been no such problem with yesterday's guidance: Vox had spoken of a girl with the dance in her eyes, he had asked to see her. As the girl walked nervously into the sanctum, Randal was caught by the life in her eyes, the gentle lilt of her walk.

He forced himself to look at the face of Vox. There were matters to be settled. Lambert had objected, accused his father of interfering, but Randal had been firm. The girl was coming to see The Apostle.

Vox's eyes were unusually intent, focussed on the girl as she approached tentatively. "Eh what?" he said.

The girl seemed overawed by the array of equipment and organs that filled the sanctum. She paused for a moment and looked curiously at the Apostle's signing hand; it twitched and she drew herself sharply away. "I knew it would be like this," she said, without waiting to be spoken to first, "but then again, I *didn't*." She ran a hand lightly over a plastic panel that walled in Vox's second pancreatic chamber. "Why is there so much?" she asked.

Randal had been stunned by the girl's casual manner in the presence of The Apostle, but there was something about her that stilled his anger, slowed his raging pulse.

"Eh what?" repeated Vox, drawing Randal's gaze once more from the girl.

"Why are you so big?" asked the girl, moving towards Vox's face.

"Spare capacity," said Vox. "There's so much of me that doesn't work that I need it all. And then -" he cackled, trailed off into a faint wheeze - "I need the spare capacity to look after the spare capacity!" He laughed again, and his tongue curled out to work a fresh supply of saliva around his cracking lips and onto his chin.

Randal could only watch. Vox was rarely this lucid, rarely so directly aware of the people around him. When he stopped speaking his mouth continued to open and close, open and close, as if the words were being plucked away from his lips before they could reach Randal.

The girl moved forward and knelt before The Apostle so that their eyes were on

the same level. She drew a small handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at his aged chin. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Why, he is Vox, Apostle of the Universal Mind!" spluttered Randal, shocked at the girl's behaviour. "Show some respect, girl."

But she just tossed a summer smile over her shoulder and returned her attention to the face. "Before the Awakening," she said. "What were you called? My name's Saranne."

Vox smiled, an expression that the tensions in his facial muscles had difficulty remembering. "Saranne," he repeated softly. "It was a long time ago, Saranne. Over two hundred years. They called me Raybourne, I think. Perry Raybourne." His tongue flickered around his lips. "I wasn't always like this, you know. They keep me alive."

Randal felt very much a part of the background; he felt that he might slip between

academia, scholars woken to the Mind by the words of Vox. Why? "Because he is Vox," said Randal, the girl's eyes distracting him, making him lose the words that he needed. "Because through him we come closer to the Universe."

Tears lined Saranne's cheeks, now. "But he ... it's so sad." She stood and ran from the sanctum, her bare feet slapping against the hard stone floor.

Randal turned back to Vox, saw the moisture in The Apostle's eyes. There had been an exchange, something Randal had not been a part of and he felt curiously drained, worn. "The man, his son," he said, struggling to lock his mind into Universal Impersonal. He grasped at a straw of hope and said, "During The Awakening, you said there was a girl, a student. You said she had 'the dance in her eyes'." Randal was gratified to see recognition light in Vox's expression. "She demanded to see you. What did you do?"

"The girl," said Vox. He swallowed and continued. "She was no good; closed to The Mind. I told her she had to go. I've got her kidneys now." He paused and a convulsion twisted the left side of his face into a wild grimace for a second or two. "I'm hungry," he said. "Bring me some food."

Randal ignored the last demand. "May the Universal Mind always be with us, through you, my lord," he said. He backed away from Vox's face, turned and left the sanctum. The lord's advice was, as always, good, but Randal felt a special glow because it came so close to his own feelings of what should be done. The girl must be put out of the way, not in as bloody a manner as had been appropriate at the time of The Awakening, she just had to be sent away. Lambert would see that it was for the good in the end.

Hands hovering over Vox's lungs, Randal couldn't concentrate. He was going through the motions but the Healing trance was far beyond his reach. It had all gone so wrong. He could feel Vox's eyes burning into the back of his head, grinding into him, accusing. The old man was in a foul mood this morning. "Food! Give me food!" he cried even as Randal eased the heavy wooden door closed behind him.

The Palace was a hive of activity, as was routine on a Sunday, novices hurrying around in their pale green robes, striving for the calm assurance of their superiors. Lambert had always been a good boy, until this girl, this Saranne; if he had stuck to his studies he could at least have become a textuary, if not a prelate like his father. But the girl had ruined it all.

Saranne had taken it calmly, her eyes speaking to him more clearly than any words. Accusing him. She would be far away by now, banished to the north. Lam-



the paving slabs of the floor, become part of the room. It would be his place.

For a long interval the girl - Saranne - and Vox shared a deep silence, then she turned to Randal. "Why?" she asked softly. Her eyes, that had sparkled with life, now sparkled with moisture. "Why do you have to do this to him?"

Randal did not know what to say. Who would ever think of such a question? Vox was the finest expression the Universal Mind had found in many generations. It had given him the power to lead humanity into righteousness, the ability to convert even the most rigid of minds - The Awakening had begun in the highest reaches of



# IRONBAR

by RIK GAMMACK

When Big Al invited me to join the boys down at the strip I was both flattered and surprised. Flattered that anyone here would have heard of me; surprised because I didn't think there was any thing like a dragster on the whole planet.

Maybe I should explain. The planet is Ironbar, the prison planet over by the Horse-shoe Nebulae. I had made the mistake of thinking I could make a very fast buck (if you get my meaning) by putting my drag racing skills into the getaway business. Consequently I hired myself and my dragster out to an established firm of bank robbers and eagerly awaited my first job.

In actual fact, it wasn't a bank. That end of the business has gone downhill since the advent of the World Credit System virtually wiped out all forms of cash. We went for the Drug Vaults over by the Gatwick Space Centre. You know, where they store all those hi-tech drugs they make or refine in space before shipping them round the world. A small shipment of Spikenard had just come in and we were after it. Something which can just about regenerate the entire nervous system from a single cell is worth an awful lot of money.

The job itself went exactly to schedule. We passed into the port without a hitch, and Phil and Karl strolled into the Vault offices at precisely 11:47. At 12 noon, on the dot, they came running back out, just as the daily shuttle roared off its pad and drowned the sound of any shooting. They leapt into the car and I floored the accelerator.

I don't know if you realise this, but driving on the road is very different from driving down the strip. I might be fast but I don't get much practice at cornering. Racing tyres are designed for straightlines too. They're called 'slicks'. No tread, just plenty of surface area for maximum friction at the off. So between one thing and another, and with a light rain I didn't quite make it out of the gate.

I got a message from old Mr Kray, the head of the firm, while I was in remand. He said he had appointed a special solicitor to look after my case and make sure I didn't get any worse sentence than I deserved. I thought that was really nice of him, especially since Phil was his grandson and would be on crutches for the next couple of months. Anyway, I guess the solicitor didn't do so well, because that's how I ended up here, on Ironbar. Which is fairly ironic really (no pun intended) since this is where raw Spikenard comes from, the stuff we were trying to steal.

Big Al was the first person to speak to me on my arrival. He was standing by the door

from the processing area, and although twenty of us were ejected out at the same time, he picked me out straight away.

"Mr Kray tol' me t' look afta ya," he said with a checkered grin. He took the small bag of possessions and led me away from where the other new arrivals were still milling around in total confusion. I don't blame them; I would have been confused myself.

In front of us lay the landscape of Ironbar; dry, dusty and scorchingly hot. Already my eyes were watering from the glare and my throat had started to shrivel. The few plants that forced their way between the rust coloured rocks looked twisted and desiccated.

"Where is it?" I croaked. "Where's the prison?"

"Dis is it," grinned Al. "De whole ting."

"There's no walls. Nothing". I looked around, but the only building in the vicinity was the guard house I had just come from, and it was obvious that that was designed to keep people out, not in. Otherwise, there was only a small cluster of huts in the distance, and beyond that lay the horizon.

"Dat's right. Nuttin at all," agreed Al. He jerked his thumb back at the sealed block-house behind us. "Everythin' is in dere."

When I just looked blankly at him for a while, he continued. "All de food, all de water, all the nice cool air is in de guard house. De guards stay inside, and we get de resta de planet to oursel's."

I took another look around, and despite the heat I shivered. "It doesn't seem a fair swap somehow."

"Dam right" So saying, Al headed off towards the village I had seen earlier, leaving me to follow. I noticed that the other arrivals had decided to follow suit, and were tagging along at a discrete distance.

As we walked, the big man told me more about how the prison planet operated. Apparently, the inmates are left pretty well to do as they wish. However, none of the local life is edible and Earth crops just wither and die in the alkaline soil, so the prisoners are totally dependant on food given out by the guards. And this is where the catch comes in.

Ironbar is almost the most useless planet that anyone has found in this arm of the galaxy apart from one thing that I mentioned earlier. Ironbar is the source of the wonderdrug Spikenard. The oil is extracted from the roots of a particular woody plant which is only found on portions of the northern continent. In order to survive, the prisoners must take in a certain amount of the oil each month to trade for food at a market held just in front of the blockhouse. No oil, no food.

"Dat's de only time de guards come out"

said Al. "Dat an' when dey gotta do a bottlin'."

"A bottling? What's that?" I asked, but that's when Al invited me down to the strip and I forgot to ask again.

We didn't even bother to go into the village. Al said they were running that afternoon, and we should see it while we could. Finding a bed could wait.

The track was to one side of the village, just beyond an outcrop of the local rusty stone, and I could hear the roars and screeches from some distance away. There was one particularly deep bellow and a cloud of white smoke drifted up followed by loud cheering.

"That must be some machine" I commented, eager to see the action. After the time on remand and the time spent getting here I was itching to get back behind a wheel again.

"Yeah. A real monster" grinned Al.

I saw what he meant when we crested the rise. Below us lay a long narrow gully, like a dried out river. Its upper slopes, the old banks, were packed with cheering prisoners, while at the far end, in the river bed itself, the previous contestants were just finishing their run. I stood in open mouthed amazement, totally gob smacked.

"You like dem?" asked Al, his wide smile showing even more space which should have been occupied by teeth.

"What are they?" I squeaked. "They look like dinosaurs." They did too, from what I could see at that distance.

"We call dem *dragons*," giggled Al, poking me in the ribs with an enormous finger. "Dat's why we call it drag-racing." He burst into unrestrained laughter. I pretended to laugh too because he obviously thought it was very funny and might be offended if I said what I really thought. I thought it was probably healthier not to offend Big Al.

"Come over an' meet de resta de guys," he said, and we walked up to what appeared to be the starting line. There, teams of men were gathered round what I presumed were the next runners, feeding and grooming them, and I got my first chance to see a dragon up close.

It was about seven feet high at the shoulder and maybe twenty-five feet long from snout to tail. A bit like a crocodile really except that it had straight legs like a horse, not those bent ones that most lizards have. Its scales were a rich iridescent green and varied from about the size of my spread hand along its back to thumb-nail size under the throat. Its eyes gleamed with dark red malevolence, like pools of drying blood, and I was grateful for the strips of leather

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# CLEANEST

## Solution

by Martin Wesley

**"I**dle bastard!"  
"Fat slob."

Little brats! I'd only asked them to pick my magazine up off the floor - they were closer to it than me. After all, wasn't that the more sensible alternative? Surely, it was better for me to conserve energy, expanding it only on necessary, vital tasks? They're young with plenty of excess energy to use up, so it's better they spend it on me than wasting it on street corners.

And those kids could only reply with a few mild insults. Huh, so much for modern education! Ah well, it's a few more to add to the list - many more and I'll be able to have my own chapter in Roget's Thesaurus. Well, I've been collecting them long enough, ever since my first day at school ...

... Mary Simpson had been sitting next to me, her long pigtail (with the silly, little yellow ribbon badly tied into a bow at the end of it) snaking all the way down her back. I'd only wanted the red paint which was just in front of her, just beyond the limit of my reach. It had been so much easier for me to tug her pigtail and get her to pass the paint ...

So much for girlfriends! And to cap it all, the corner of Miss Winthorpe's classroom had been really dirty ...

**W**ell, here we are. Number one Mayberry Court. Lucky find that - ground floor flat right beside the bus stop. Couldn't have wished for better really. There's even someone to look after the building and the gardens. It looks really nice at this time of the evening, the line of cherry trees in full blossom down the side of the building and all those differently coloured flowers in the tubs under the windows; the evening air disturbed only by scattered birdsong and the buzz of the flymo over the front lawn.

"Evening, Mr Jegggar."

That's Sally - the latest trainee gardener. She's looking as pretty as ever, her short blonde hair framing her face, and her blue eyes sparkling. Pity about that shapeless green overall that she wears, I've only ever guessed at what her body's actually like. When she first started I used to spend a few sleepless nights, tossing and turning, my mind filled with fantasies about removing her overalls ... However, today, my mind is on higher things so I just nod as a reply (it takes less energy than any other gesture, or even speaking) and walk across to the flat. Two manilla envelopes lay in the little wire basket behind the waist-high letter flap. They're from the gas and electric companies but I leave them there because I pay them by direct debit. It saves time - I don't have to open bills, write cheques or send

them back. I can really recommend it as an excellent labour-saving device. I make straight for the kitchenette to transfer the shopping from my bag to the freezer. Whilst there I remove 'The Special' (not just any 'Menu Master' but my favourite - Boeuf Stroganoff to cook in the microwave, with a gateau to follow. I've been keeping them specially for this occasion. While the Stroganoff's cooking I fetch the bottle of champagne that's to accompany the meal. And as it's a celebration I'm going to break with tradition and waste some energy. I'm going to move into the lounge and eat in front of the telly. At last I'm in a position to make life exactly what I want it to be.

**T**here have been two exceptions to my lifetime's devotion to lethargy: cleanliness and my work. I suppose you could say that it was the former that led me to the latter thanks to my mother. She was a simple woman and very devout in her religious convictions. Hah! Her maxim in life was "Cleanliness is next to Godliness". And didn't she indoctrinate us - me from the moment I was born!

I think it was when 'Jegggar Junior' (the revolting pet name that she had for me) won our church's annual 'Cleanest Baby Competition' (no prizes for guessing who the organiser of *that* was!) for the third consecutive year, that dad died. Many neighbours claimed that, because mum would never think of (let alone allow) a divorce, this had been his only escape from her unceasing sanitations. At the time I was too young to know, or appreciate this, but in later life I was to see precisely what they meant. The incident was but a small hiccup in her life - from then on she was able to keep the house totally clean without him under her feet, as she saw it. Consequently I grew up in a rather sterile environment; in more ways than one.

Every Sunday we had to go to *every* Mass, Mum making sure that we were totally clean first. She was excessively compulsive in her attention to our cleanliness; not a single speck of dirt escaped her eye. And, just to make certain, she repeated the exercise before each Mass. For the rest of the week these ablutions were merely daily, but I still had to help keep the house as spotless as our bodies. In time I became so used to this habit that I actually started to accept, and even enjoy it. However the time that all this work occupied prevented me from following the sort of activities and hobbies that most boys follow whilst they are growing up: girls in particular.

From my time at infant school right up to my undergrad days, I was a bit of a loner.

No-one particularly wanted to be associated with the son of a freak, or a freak himself (as they later saw me). It was during my middle school years, or thereabouts, that I stopped believing in a god that was a theological concept promising life after death - it just wasn't logical; cleanliness was another matter - it just wasn't logical to be dirty! The daily chores, though, were very tiring. I only seemed to have just enough energy to do my homework and the rest of my studies. The only sensible option was to conserve as many joules as possible. My dedication to essential lethargy had begun.

It was Mrs Cremty (my biology teacher) who inadvertently gave me the inspiration that led me to my ultimate career. A mention about genetic engineering, in a lesson one day, started me thinking. Was it possible to alter mum's genes to make her less obsessive and more like a real mum (the sort that all the others seemed to have?) Of course, I later came to realise the impossibility of such a feat, but it did make me follow a science-based course throughout my school career so that I could study for an appropriate degree.

My mother died during my time in the sixth form. The incident was but a small hiccup in my life - at least I could now keep the house *totally* clean without her in the way.

I got three straight grade As in biology, chemistry and maths and went up to Cambridge to read Natural Sciences. I became totally fascinated with Sanger's dideoxy method for protein sequencing, and equally interested in the research into genetic manipulation. Extra to my studies, I would get hold of everything published in the field, reading it and absorbing it until I could think of little else - apart from my main studies of course! I still needed to get my degree. It must have been around this time (although I don't know quite when it happened) that all my subconscious ideas gelled to become my 'ultimate goal'.

**T**he only thing that prevented me putting all my time to this work was the daily cleaning routine - I never could find a cleaner that came anywhere near *my* standards of cleanliness and the time needed to do all the dusting, hoovering, etc never seemed to get any shorter. I did find a partial solution during my second year and why I never thought of it sooner I'll never know. I sold the old family house and bought a small flat near to the University. But it started me thinking - what if I could genetically engineer a bacterium that would eat dust and dirt? My problems would be



solved forever! I might even get rich if I owned it, especially now that the Yanks were allowing new life-forms to be patented. Once I'd had this idea, it wouldn't leave me - the thought kept me going through my entire time at university.

Upon completing my PhD, I had no trouble getting a job with 'NuMol Ltd.' (a genetic engineering firm based in the Cambridge science park), as my thesis *"Applications of Gene-Mapping to the Synthetic Production of Naturally-Occurring Compounds"* had attracted an awful lot of interest within the genetics industry. As a result I was able to choose a company that best suited my needs. Ostensibly my work was to alter *Escherichia coli's* DNA base sequence so that it would produce insulin on a large scale. However I was able to secretly work on my own alterations to *E. coli*.

Now, the major component of dust is dead skin cells, which are mostly denatured scleroprotein. My aim was to determine the sequence of its constituent amino acids. Having done that, the next task would be to find an enzyme that would hydrolyse the peptide bonds and absorb the resulting free amino acids. This latter task would no doubt be the most time-consuming. The final stage would be to deduce the correct series of bases that needed to be inserted into *E. coli's* DNA so that the RNA in the cell would, when reading it, be fooled into producing this enzyme (or 'dustase' as I began to call it).

It took ten years but, eventually, I did it. Now I'd got to try it out.

Despite the anathema that it caused, I had to allow a corner shelf in my office to become dusty. After a couple of weeks I introduced some of the dust onto an agar plate containing the *E. coli* culture. It only took one day for the dust to be completely

eaten! The next stage was to put the culture onto the shelf. This time the dust was gone after two days. Far faster than I'd thought possible. In fact the shelf now had the clean, shiny appearance normally only obtained after using plenty of elbow grease.

However, now came the ultimate test. If this worked, fame and fortune (patent permitting) were mine. If not... I preferred not to consider that aspect.

I took the total batch of "Jeggar Clean" (a good marketing strategy that, a name that could roll off the tongue, just like Domestos!) home. The frustration of leaving the flat untouched for a whole month was almost too much to bear; four times in the first week alone I had started to dust the lounge and only then thought to stop myself. It was only the idea of never having to clean it again that gave me the patience to wait the month out.

Well, that's the last few drops of the champagne. Let's face it - I've earned it. For the past twenty eight days the flat's been completely free of dust. The original culture that I'd shared out equally between each room in the flat has multiplied far better than I ever dared to hope. In fact it's exceeded all my expectations, there's even evidence that it's also been eating dirt, and even the tidemark in the bath!

So what's next? Perhaps I could adapt the bacterium even further so that it would eat left-overs. Most foods, once cooked, then consist of denatured proteins and so should be acceptable to "Jeggar Clean II". What if I included two more guanine and one more adenine to the... um... ur... All that champagne, and the meal... the room's rather warm...

should give it a go.

"Sure, why not," I said, giving him a slap on the back. "Just show me where the rider sits, and I'll give it a whirl."

"It doesn't work like that I'm afraid," said Mike, taking my arm from his shoulder and transferring it to Al, who held on to it quite hard.

"Oh?" I muttered, trying to ease the grip.

"It's not like horse racing either, you see. Much more like dog racing," he paused with a smile, "where the hounds are set loose after the hare."

I think it was about then that I began to suspect that things were not as right as they should be, and all the smiles that surrounded me began to look less friendly. I tried to protest, but it did no good. Even when I pointed out that Mr Kray had asked them especially to look after me they only seemed to find it amusing.

So that is how I ended up pelting down a narrow gully with crowds of cheering men on either side and a trio of hungry dragons bellowing behind. There's a steel box at the finishline, and if I had managed to reach it and close the lid behind me I would have been safe. Apparently, every so often, someone actually makes it. I didn't.

Which takes us to the final part of Mr Kray's revenge, because it turned out that he had engineered the whole thing. And I thought he was such a nice guy too. The

not Bob Monkhouse again... zzzzz

Uh? What the hell???

It's so quiet. Oh, I see - the National Anthem's finished. Well, I'd better get to bed, it's been a good day - month, even.

Funny, I've got pins and needles all over...

My hands - the skin's all blotchy, it's disappeared in places! Blood, lymph, cytoplasm - they're all seeping from the blotches! My other hand's the same! I wasn't expecting this! The tingling - the rest of my body must be doing the same! There's hair in my lap!

Jesus Christ! Help me! Please!

So this is death. But how?

"Jeggar Clean" must be even more advanced than I'd realised. Once released from the sterile lab, it must have mutated; presumably I've altered the DNA more profoundly than had shown up in those tests. Not only can it eat denatured protein, it's now also capable of eating live protein. I have surpassed myself! Not only does it remove dust, it now prevents the dust from forming in the first place!

Well, at least I'll leave the flat clean.



## MARTIN WESLEY

Martin Wesley is in his early thirties. He is head of Chemistry at a secondary school in St Albans. "The Cleanest Solution" is his first published work, and the idea came to him whilst dusting one day - a chore he loathes.

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that muzzled it tightly. A thin dribble of steam escaped between curled lips.

"Is it," I began, but had to clear my throat. "Is it dangerous?"

"Is it that, my friend," said a new voice behind me and I turned to face a very thin wiry man with greying hair. "I'm Mike Carbon," he said, thrusting forward a hand. "I'm glad Al found you okay. I would have come to greet you myself, but I had things to do here." He gestured around at the milling scene.

Now I really felt flattered. Mike Carbon was the man who lifted the entire consignment of gold from the *Intrepid* between Mars and Earth and had almost got away with it. If Mr Kray had arranged for Mike Carbon to look after me, then my stay here might turn out to be bearable after all.

"Well, Mike," I said, putting a friendly arm around his shoulder, "it's certainly a bit different from the racing I'm used to. I suppose Mr Kray did tell you that I was a bit of a racer back home?"

"He made a point of it actually," said Mike, with an odd smile. "He thought you might enjoy trying our variation on it. What do you say?"

Well, I was slightly taken aback. There didn't seem to be any similarities between the two at all, and I had no idea of how I would fare. Still, if Mr Kray had gone to the trouble of arranging this for me, then I felt I

final part was when the guards came out of their enclave and scooped my remains into a jar of Spikenard; the 'bottling' that Al had spoken about. There's plenty of the wonder drug around here and with enough of it you can damn near regenerate an entire body. They say I'll be fit to race again in a few weeks and with a bit of practice I might get quite good.

When they sentence you to life out here, they make sure you don't die and miss any of it.



## RICK GAMMACK

After various jobs ranging from barman to fruit-picker, Rick Gammack ended up at Art College. There he studied computer programming which he still does for a living. His first interest has always been science fiction, and for the last few years he has been making a serious effort to write some of his own. "IRONBAR" is his second story to be published. The first was "Mr Pemberton's Butler" in "Dream" magazine. He lives with his wife, daughter and cat in Saffron Walden.

# ODD MAN OUT



**T**he horses' hooves drummed on the turf like giant fingers as they charged the fence. Bookies and tipsters seemed to watch with a professional disinterest while the crowd shouted the riders on. I adjusted my binoculars to pan after the animals but was distracted by the stumbling man.

He was shambling between the booths and touts after the horses. His furtive, despairing manner caught my professional attention and I forgot my bet as I watched him stumble. The turn-ups of his trousers were already splashed with mud and the elbows of his checked jacket had been recently patched. His greying hair was a mess of brilliantine and dust, but he had obviously remembered to shave that morning, cutting himself badly while he did it.

What fascinated me as a psychologist was the handful of notes he continually shuffled and consulted. As far as I could make out from my position in the stand, he was carrying a bundle of index cards. I was out to study gamblers but he seemed to lack even the slightest trace of the style. He was not here because he liked to gamble, I decided; he was here because the racecourse allowed him another opportunity to do what he did best.

The race was won without me and the crowd began to move. I might have lost him forever, there and then, and filed him away as another unretrieved mental note if he hadn't been behind me in the same queue to collect our winnings. Even at that, I would probably have missed him if he hadn't been sneezing so hard.

I collected my meagre profits from a novice's wager on the favourite and turned away, keeping a non-directive eye on this shabby punter. It was a surprise to me that he'd won anything at all, but it was a genuine shock when he raked back hundreds of

pounds from a complex accumulator bet. He was nervous and sweaty. This was understandable considering his ten-pound stake had multiplied into a serious hole in the bookies' accounts. He stuffed the winnings into his jacket pockets, which I now realised were also crammed with index cards, and then sneezed out his thanks and ran.

I gave up. I was tired by the day's observations and didn't want my wife to worry about where I was. Unfortunately, the car had a punctured rear tyre when I returned to it.

I knelt down to examine the deflated tyre and decided that I must have rolled over some broken glass or a workman's nail when I drove off the road. There had been no sign of trouble on the drive down.

"Hello, Jim."

I turned in astonishment to see the dirty little gambler grinning sheepishly behind me again.

"It is Jim, isn't it? Yes, Jim Carpenter, I think ..."

I was taken aback, positive that I'd never met the man before. If not the sagging, sheepish face, then surely the nervous, humble mannerisms would have stuck with me: it was my job to notice such things after all. I knew that I'd never met anyone like him before.

"Could you give me a lift, Jim? You see, I don't have a car."

I turned back to the tyre but the pressure seemed to be normal. On impulse, I smiled and said, "All right, get in."

"Do you often have trouble with flats?" he asked slyly as I pulled away.

"No," I replied frankly. "I can't remember when I last had a puncture."

He grinned strangely to himself as I reached the road. I shook my head for a moment. That statement seemed wrong.

A dark cloud of doubt was hovering somewhere in the clear sky of my memory. A military jet flew deafeningly low overhead, tearing up the sky.

What was wrong? I had a feeling of being somehow disconnected. Why was I giving this man a lift? I didn't even know his name.

Perhaps I was just over tired. His company would at least keep me awake.

"Sam Dickerson," the gambler said, finally introducing himself properly.

"Where are you going to, Sam?" I asked. "Home," he said, so we did.

**L**ater, Helen followed me into the kitchen as I unravelled the shrink-wrapped pizza and tried to slot it into the oven. We could see the back of Dickerson's head, illuminated by the late-afternoon sun, through the door. He was sitting quietly on the sofa, his silence only broken by the occasional sneeze.

"For goodness sake, Jimmy," my wife whispered, shaking her curly red hair, "How could you bring him home?"

"He had nowhere else to go," I explained - but I couldn't even convince myself.

"Who is he?" Helen's soft voice had begun to rise and I had a headache. The clouds of confusion in my mind were gathering into a thunderhead. It was something to do with a flat tyre -

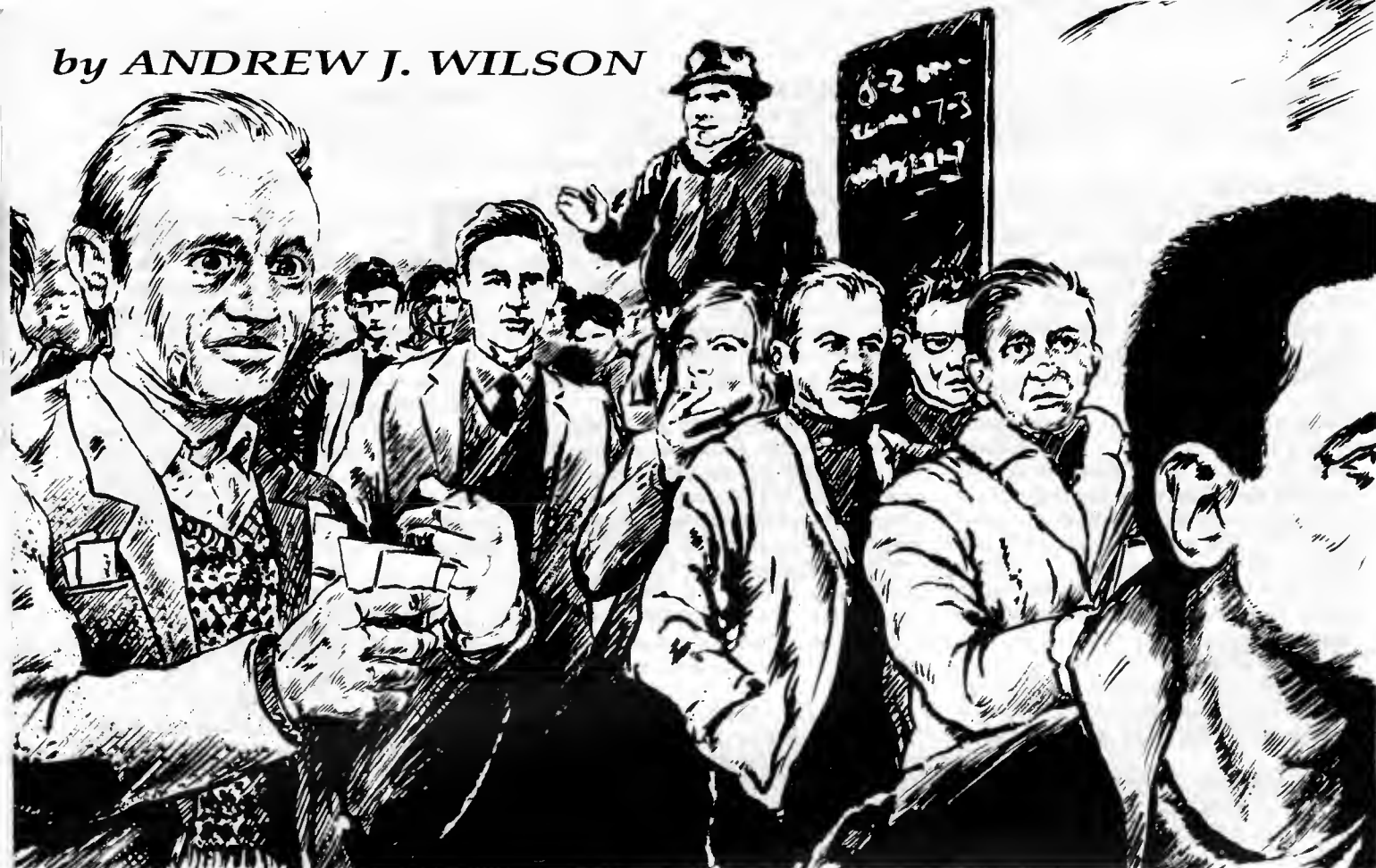
"Are you studying him?" she asked, beginning to comprehend.

"He's a gambler - down on his luck, I think, but he's just had a big win. But there's something else. Dickerson's different in some way I've yet to figure out ..."

We had attracted Dickerson's attention now. His eyes widened, the whites burning in a flash of light. The thunderhead seemed to burst out of my mind and fracture the sky.

Helen watched the lightning crackling in





the torrential downpour and said firmly, "You can't send him out in that if he's got nowhere else to go. He can stay the night at least!"

I was desperately confused now. Hadn't we been arguing about something else? My migraine made it difficult to think.

Helen went back into the living room and smiled at Dickerson. "Dinner's ready," she told him.

It was the first close look at her he'd had. Lightning from far off seemed to be reflected in his eyes.

"You're going to have a baby this year, a baby boy," he said with wonder as he studied Helen's face.

She gasped in shock and then ran from the room. I put down the food in front of him.

"Sam, Helen has had two miscarriages." He looked upset. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"You couldn't have, but she doesn't think she'll ever carry a child to term."

Dickerson looked at his plate and said with absolute conviction, "She's going to have a boy this winter. He'll have red hair and green eyes, just like her."

We ate our pizza in silence.

I had to drive him back to the race track the following week because he said he couldn't remember the way. He was nervous and restrained, sneezing himself into silence and studying his note cards. Dickerson made six accumulator bets at different bookies. Each bet was the same. He won thousands. We slunk away, trying to avoid the furious stares. I suggested that, if his luck was going to hold out, he should try a different track the next time.

We were all sitting in the living room waiting for the television news. Helen was playing with the new video that Sam had

insisted on buying us out of his winnings of the last month. He was furiously scribbling notes on the new set of blank cards which I had given him.

"You're partially amnesiac, aren't you Sam?" I said, trying to catch him off guard.

"Yes.. Well no... I forget things sometimes."

"But you're remarkably good at predictions," Helen pointed out. "How can that be?"

Dickerson sneezed and shuffled his cards. "I suppose you think I'm schizophrenic, don't you, Jim?"

"No, Sam, you're not. I don't know what you are."

His piercing eyes flashed deep in the folds and wrinkles of his collapsing face.

"I'm different, a sort of odd man out. Things are reversed for me: cause follows effect. The rest of you live your lives as if you're climbing a mountain. I don't. To me, life is like falling helplessly down a cliff. What I can do is remember the future, but I can't do anything about it. On the other hand, I can change the past ..." He was noting down his confession as he spoke.

The clouds began to disperse in my mind. I understood the ghost memory of the puncture at the racecourse, the confusing afternoon that followed which had seemed sunny although I knew it had rained all day.

Dickerson continued: "The gearbox of my life has been put into reverse by something that happened to me. But I don't know what it was because I can't remember the past!"

"How can you alter what has already happened?" Helen wondered.

"I don't know ..." he groaned. How do people like yourselves shape the future? I can't do anything because - damn it - I know what's going to happen, although it does get more hazy the further forward it is, thank God. But I'm able to bend the past to

suit my will - in small ways - by working out what has happened by what is and will be happening. I stopped Jim getting a flat tyre before we met by picking up a nail that was hidden in the grass. Of course, he couldn't have known about that ..."

Helen and I looked at each other for help, unable to decide whether Dickerson was telling the whole truth or not, or even if he believed it at all.

"I can't show you how I change the past because your memories will alter too. I can only predict the future for you."

He looked at his watch. "The news is about to come on. We'll watch it and the big item will report an incident that occurred three hours ago in West Germany. A peace demonstration tried to block some tanks on military manoeuvres. There was a mistake and a young student protester was crushed to death. The demonstration has turned into a riot."

Helen changed channels for the news. It wasn't in the headlines. Halfway through the programme, the newsreader was interrupted and announced the tragedy.

Sam Dickerson was right.

I had driven him into town a few weeks later so that he could buy a new suit. We met back at the car at dusk. He looked very fine. His hair was clean and neatly trimmed, and his hollow cheeks were bloodlessly shaven. He was dressed in a fine dark grey jacket and trousers with a powder blue shirt and paisley tie. His black brogues were heeled and polished.

"I can see it coming, Jim."

"What is it, Sam?"

"My death. It's coming into focus now."

I shuddered. He seemed too calm.

"I was wrong, Jim. Nothing 'happened' to make me like this, it's going to happen in

the near future. The thing that will kill me is the thing that made me the odd man out."  
"For goodness sake, man, can't you avoid it?"

"I don't think that's possible. I just wish that I could do something to make a difference for everybody, to give it all a meaning. I see so much trouble coming ..."

I refused to give up hope. "Sam, you can tell me what you know. Perhaps we can work it out together with your precognition and my memory ... And with our combined abilities to mould the past and future a little bit!"

He nodded, "Yes, maybe... There is going to be a plane crash, Jim ... An Air Force bomber is going to be damaged in flight over the North Sea while carrying nuclear warheads on an exercise over the weekend. It will lose radar and radio and guidance systems. The pilot will try to make land by dead reckoning, but he won't succeed. Then the radio-active masses will escape from their casements into the sea. I think this will be the last straw for the environment.. The synergistic reaction with previous and following pollutants will tip the balance and destroy all life in the North Sea."

"Like an accumulator bet with a lethal pay off," I finished grimly for him.

"Jim, can we do something?"

We drove for the East Coast on the Saturday and climbed to the clifftop nearest the predicted flight path. Night had fallen. Sam remembered the exact time of the crash from the government statement made by an official on a future news bulletin.

Sam watched from the gorse-topped cliff with my racing binoculars, sneezing occasionally as the hour approached. Then I emptied a petrol can over the bushes and set them alight. We ran from the burning stretch of clifftop and hoped.

Somewhere over the North Sea, an explosion destroyed the instruments in the cockpit of a stealth bomber. The pilot tried to wrestle the crippled plane towards the shore. This time, the real time, he sighted the flames from our bonfire and managed to bring the plane down in some nearby fields and escape.

I drove Sam home and we opened the whisky for a toast. Helen was asleep. The news reported that the fields were being cordoned off, but the danger was minimal compared to what would have happened if the bomber had ditched in the sea.

"We can change things, Sam!"

He made his sad and sheepish grin. "Sometimes. We did the right thing, Jim, and I'm glad. I made my twisted life count. Still, sometimes we have to face the inevitable too."

"Oh, come on, Sam."

"No, Jim, I mean it! My 'memory' is clear now. Yes, you've proved that I could avoid my death, but then I wouldn't be what I am, a precognitive wrinkle in time ... So we'd never meet, never prevent the disaster. Thousands and thousands of people would suffer, not just me."

"Don't be a martyr!" I felt confused again.

"I'm not. I've lived my life as best I could and ended it with the friendship of decent people. I've found a home. And I've pre-

vented disaster."

I sat speechless and helpless as he got up and walked out, asking, "Do you want to live forever?"

**H**elen and I never saw him again, never heard of his fate. I can still see him in my dreams, though, walking down a road at night, dressed in his good suit and brogues, walking bravely to his fate despite his occasional sneezes: for us, for all of us, and for himself.

Our son was born in the autumn. He has red hair and green eyes. Helen suggested that we name him after the man whose prediction had brought him to life. We did. I can see Sam playing before me now, symbolising a living memory. He'll be told all this in good time, and remember it too; remember it for his namesake.



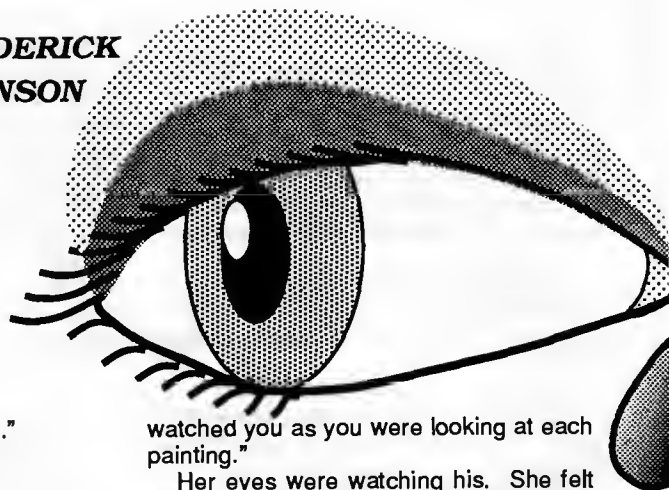
## ANDREW J WILSON

Andrew J Wilson has published stories in *Fear*, Glasgow's *West Coast Magazine* and *Daw Books' Year's Best Horror Stories XIX*. Another is due soon in *R.E.M. Number 2*. He currently lives in Edinburgh and works for a medical and scientific publisher.



# TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE MISS ELLIS

by RODERICK  
WILKINSON



On this warm, summer day the Art Museum was almost deserted. The bright sunshine from the park outside filtered its glow through the quiet, terrazo-floored galleries and the stone arches that led to the echoing, empty rooms.

The girl's footsteps click-clacked and resounded all the way through the Early Italian Room, into the Flemish Room and into the long Early English Gallery as she tried to walk quietly on the polished wooden floor.

The man who sat alone on the wooden seat at the end of the room had dark-grey hair and wore a mustard-tweed suit and a dark-green cravat. His walking stick was leaning on the seat as he stared at a painting before him.

A ray of sunshine dulled by the tall windows surrounded her slim shape as she walked slower towards him. "Hello, Mr Manheim?"

The man only moved his eyes to look at the fair-haired girl in the Kaftan blouse caught by a broad red belt around her narrow waist. "Good afternoon, Miss Ellis."

She smiled, "I'm so sorry I'm a little late."

He pointed to the vacant part of the seat beside him. "Please don't apologise. Time doesn't mean much here." He smiled wanly, "And Art students are rarely punctual."

She sat down timidly.

He continued to stare at the painting on the wall in front of him, and he was silent.

After a few moments she coughed and said, "It's very good of you to take this trouble."

"It is no trouble," he said, still staring in front, "I have all the time in the world."

"Is this one of the paintings you were discussing with me on Monday?" She looked from the painting to his face.

He smiled. "No, it isn't."

She half-smiled, waiting on him to say something. But he was looking at her eyes.

She looked round the large empty gallery. "The place is empty today."

"It's a week day. And it's July."

"And the weather's so good - people will be out at the park."

"Yes," he said, "And not many come into this room, anyway. It's usually quiet here."

They were silent again. His grey intense eyes were still on her face and she avoided looking at them. Then she said, "You - said something on Monday about how to look at pictures?"

"Yes," he said. "Didn't I?" He continued to look at her as one side of his mouth creased very slightly upwards in a faint smile. "Tell me, Miss Ellis - what d'you see in pictures?"

She stared at him, her blue eyes wide yet calm, "See in them?" She thought. "Beauty,

sometimes. Colour. Symmetry."

"Nobility?"

"Sometimes."

"Majesty?"

"Yes."

He picked up his walking stick, leaned on it thoughtfully for a moment, then rose.

"Show me."

"One of my favourite paintings?" She got up.

"Yes - one of your favourites."

They walked slowly down the room past the rows of the Ames landscapes, the Corbetts, the magnificent portraits by Ezra Gladstone, the seascapes by Imrie - until they were opposite a very large painting set in a wide gilt frame. It was an English landscape, 'Keppler's Mill' by Lawrence Needham - splendid in its subtle summer tones, its wide, blue skyline and the intimacy of the two figures by the still stream.

Manheim stared at it. "You like this?"

"Yes" she said, "I've always liked it."

He took her by the arm. "Have you wondered why that picture appeals to you particularly?"

They walked on slowly. "No, I just know it does."

"It's a very beautiful scene - well painted. I've been there."

She stared at him. "Been there?"

"Yes. Sat on the bank of the river."

"It's still there then - Keppler's Mill?"

"No. I mean I've been in the painting."

She said nothing but watched him with her eyes. Then she said, "I don't understand."

His hand gripped her arm as he indicated a seat. "Sit down here, Miss Ellis."

When he leaned his stick on the seat beside him, he said, "When I saw you here on Monday with your note-pad and spoke to you, I promised that if you came back today, I would explain to you the *true* meaning of appreciating art, didn't I?"

"Yes," she said. "You did."

He smiled. "What I want to tell you now is that when an artist paints a masterpiece, he leaves part of his soul on the canvas. Did you realise that?" he raised one eyebrow.

"N-No, I didn't. But I understand what you mean."

"And if you understand that, you must believe me when I tell you that there are a few people - very, very few - who can cross over to become one with the artist's work - join his creation." He paused. "I am one. And I believe you may also have that gift. It's in your eyes."

"You - think so?" he voice sounded weaker.

"That is why I spoke to you on Monday. I

watched you as you were looking at each painting."

Her eyes were watching his. She felt slightly afraid. "Join the artist's creation?"

"Yes. What I mean, Miss Ellis, is that I have been in many of these paintings."

She stared at him.

"Into the picture" he said. "Through the frame - into the scene."

She half-rose as if to go, "Mr Manheim..."

He held her wrist. "Please - sit down."

She did so. "I ..."

"I know. You find it difficult to believe. Look at that painting in front of us."

She looked at the large canvas. It was a landscape, sombre, melancholy and she felt a chill as she saw the dull yellow twilight, the faint mist on the moorland and the dark silhouettes of three gallows against the sky.

"What is it?"

"It's a picture of the gallows on the moors behind Prengal - painted by Roseberry in eighteen-sixty-two."

"I'd never noticed it before."

"It's a haunting scene, isn't it?"

"Haunting? Yes, it's" - she hesitated - "rather frightening."

"Tell me what you see, Miss Ellis."

"Well, I - there's the moor."

"The moor, yes - so vast and wide it disappears into the eternity of that yellow sky. What time of year is it?"

"It's - winter."

"Winter - and the dull green twilight of an early darkening. What else?"

"Is that a building in the distance?"

"That's a prison - yes. One of the cruellest prisons in England. Prisoners sometimes got away y'know - and they would run over the moors hoping to escape in the mists. D'you see the grey, cold wisps of mist?"

"Yes, I do. But why are the gallows there?"

"Ah - the gallows. When these escaped prisoners were caught that's where they hung them immediately. No prison again for them. Hung by the neck till they were dead."

She was staring, staring at the gaunt wooden structures standing like emblems of death itself against the winter sky. "It's - horrible."

"Horrible yet beautiful. Is there a wind, Miss Ellis?"

Her voice was faint. "Yes - it's a faint, cold wind."

"And you feel the damp?"

"Yes."

"Hold my hand, Miss Ellis."

She held his hand which was strong and hard. "Mr Manheim, I..."

"Come with me - over the moor."



"No ..."

"Yes!" His voice was harsher. "Over the moor!"

She felt the springy gorse and turf under her feet, felt the faint frosty wind on her face. She looked around. She was standing beside Manheim in the desolation of the wild moorland and the yellow light was on his face.

Her mouth opened in soundless terror.

He held her shaking shoulders. "Didn't I tell you? Now do you understand, Miss Ellis?"

"B-But it's ..." she was sobbing.

"Calm!" his voice sounded imperious. "Calm down child. There's no need to be frightened."

"B-But this is mad - we must get back ..."

"Yes, we will get back - through there." He pointed his walking stick to a heathery bank behind them where there was a gaping black hole. "There is always a way back. Always. In every picture - a hole."

She was still shaking as she looked around at the rolling moorland, at the three gallows in front of them.

"This is - I -" there was a sob in her voice.

His hand held hers firmly. "Calm down. Settle yourself. Now - walk with me."

Petrified she dragged her legs to walk beside him over the gorse as the swirling mist enveloped them in grey.

Suddenly Manheim stopped.

"W-What's wrong?"

"Sh," he said. "Can you hear?"

She listened and faintly - very faintly in the wind there came the distant tolling of a bell. "Yes," she said. "It's a bell."

"From the prison." His eyes were peering

through the mists towards the sound. "It's the alarm. Someone's escaped."

"Let's go back. I want to go back." She tried to free her hand from his but his grip was too strong.

"Not yet." He paused again. "Hush."

She heard faintly the barking, howling of dogs behind the rolling blankets of mist.

"They're hunting for an escaped prisoner," he said.

She wrenched her hand from his grip and turned, "We must go back."

"No - not yet. Stay with me!"

"Yes - yes - we must go back!" Her voice was sobbing as she looked around in the mist frantically for the hole in the gorse bank. She couldn't see it. She was lost.

Manheim's voice was fainter in the grey-ness. "Stay here, Miss Ellis - stay with me."

"No - Oh no!" She was crying hysterically. "I - can't find the hole." Now all she

could hear was the barking which was nearer. "I can't find it!"

There was the thumping of footsteps ... the wheezing, straining of dogs on leash.

Suddenly she saw the hole. Manheim was stumbling behind her.

She grabbed his walking stick, "I've found it - I've found

it. Come through ..." figures loomed in the gloom. "Come through ..." She pulled at his walking stick and it came from his hand.

When she staggered to her feet from the floor of the Art Museum, she was stiff and cold and she knew she must have lain there a long time. She crawled to the wooden seat and slumped. Before her the painting of Prengal Prison by Roseberry was there as it had always been - grim, sombre, majestic in its gloom.

As it had always been?

She stared in horror at the painting of the figure dangling by the neck from one of the gallows - a figure of a man in a mustard-tweed suit.

The walking stick was still in her hand.



## RODERICK WILKINSON

Roderick Wilkinson is a Scottish writer of books, plays, stories and articles whose work has been published, broadcast and televised in many countries around the world. In Germany particularly, his thriller plays and serials for radio have been popular. WDR has broadcast many of them, some of which are based in his own country Scotland and they feature the characteristics of that country - the mountains and glens and, of course, Scotch whisky! Recently his "Scottish" thriller radio plays have been "Everything Goes Dead" and "The Big Still". Wilkinson's other interest is in fishing for trout and salmon and his books on that subject have been published in German angling magazines.

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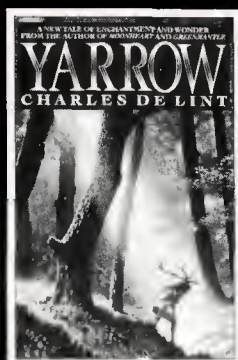
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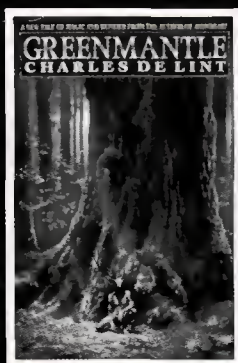
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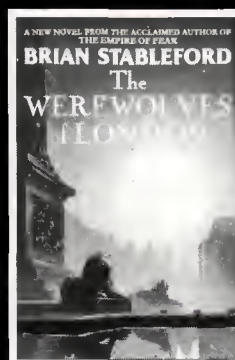
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# JOE GRIMALDI

## meets

# Shakespeare



For 54 years Harcourt had been accustomed to most actors being out of work, or "resting", as they called it, but it was his misfortune to belong to the generation of actors who all found themselves out of work permanently. He sat in his room looking at the screen of his PanOdeon computer, his joy, his toy, his curse, his opponent.

He remembered that it was important to know your enemy, and called up the *PERFORMANCE OPTIONS* menu.

PLACE: London.

PERIOD: 1590-1600.

AUTHOR: Marlowe.

COMPANY: The Admiral's Men.

PLAY: Tamburlaine the Great.

The screen burst into jarring colours, and asked him to select which scholar's interpretation he wanted. He chose Wimbush.

The screen shimmered, and then the little portico stage of the Rose Theatre appeared, with the close packed heads of the penny audience elbowing and swaying on the sloped bare earth. As always, the afternoon sun was shining; Wimbush seemed to believe that there were never any clouds or rain over Elizabethan London.

Harcourt was not interested in waiting for the trumpets to blow and the Prologue to step forward to introduce the play. He selected the *POINT TO BEGIN PERFORMANCE* menu, and chose the appearance of Tamburlaine in a chariot drawn by two captive kings.

The curtains at the back of the stage parted with a snap, and two actors with bits in their mouths skipped out, harnessed to a rickety wickerwork chariot, wildly flinching under the short whip wielded by Edward Alleyn, the star of the Admiral's Men.

"Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia!" he roared in the voice of Tamburlaine. "What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day?"

Alleyn was tall, dark haired, and with a sharp Cockney voice. That detail annoyed Harcourt. He was sure it was wrong.

He froze the scene, and chose Schwarzenheimer's interpretation instead. This time Alleyn was shorter, muscular and carried in on the actors' shoulders. He spoke with a rustic accent. Wrong again.

Harcourt changed period, moving on to the eighteenth century: David Garrick at the Theatre Royal as Richard III. Garrick wore a false beard, was dressed in Tudor costume and had a high voice. He flung his arms and legs about in the part.

Harcourt quickly became bored with the eighteenth-century production playing out on the screen. He pushed back his flimsy wooden chair and took off his spectacles. He stared up to the ceiling, up at the yellow-brown stains which looked like sulphurous clouds to his shortsighted eyes.

His cheap room looked better out of focus. The blurring improved the look of his worn-out sweater and his old slippers that were slowly disassembling themselves in

sympathy with the entropy of the Universe.

"I have become exactly what I wanted never to be," Harcourt said, speaking clearly and with full tone even though he knew nobody could hear him. He remembered how he had despised elderly actors reducing to living in squalid rooms, with no company but their memories and their old photographs.

His own young face decorated the walls and shelves. He had put up the photographs in order quite deliberately to live up to the conventional picture of the broken-down old actor. If fate had assigned him this part, he was going to play it properly, and with full attention to the details which give conviction to a performance.

Yet it was not any lack of talent in himself which had broken him; it was the PanOdeon, which had broken thousands of other actors and actresses better and worse than himself.

Harcourt gave his attention back to the screen and set the program back to the late seventeenth century. He chose a performance of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. The setting was authentic enough, with even the candle-snuffer appearing on stage during the play, wandering about among the actors to trim any guttering candles. The period had a theatrical convention that the candle-snuffer was invisible, and the audience would often stamp and bellow for the candle-snuffer to appear whenever the lighting began to misbehave.

Harcourt looked at the directions he had written out for himself to follow when he had broken into the PanOdeon's programming. He would be the greatest candle-snuffer of all time.

He became bored with the Restoration comedy, and felt some sympathy with the millions who had subscribed to the PanOdeon network. Who would not rather see a computer generated Edward Alleyn, or David Garrick or Sarah Bernhardt, rather than a live William Harcourt?

He commanded the program to go back to the Elizabethan theatre. This time he chose the Swan Theatre, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He called up the *ACTOR* and *PART PLAYED* menus, and amused himself by having Alleyn from the rival Admiral's men play Lord Talbot. The program seemed to have difficulty handling this situation: for a few seconds the movements and dialogue of the other actors slowed down, as the program modified their performances in response to the arrival of this stranger in their company, like an invading cuckoo chick.

Harcourt eagerly seized upon this weakness. He rapidly cast Sir Donald Wolfitt, Orson Welles, and Laurence Olivier in the same play, with William Shakespeare acting the part of the Duke of York.

This time the program definitely wobbled. Wolfitt's slow stateliness and Welles' combination of fury and gravity fitted in with only minor disruption, but Olivier's rapid

gabbling of the lines only caused the other actors' images to jump and flicker.

Harcourt closed down the Swan Theatre, after adding David Garrick from the eighteenth century to keep the Lord Chamberlain's men stirred up.

He moved to the *ADD NEW ACTOR* menu, and called up the image of himself that he had been planning. He checked voice, movement and appearance. He had made himself 28 years old, already an established professional, but still youthful. He had decided that if he were to be remembered, he would indulge his vanity by having himself memorialised as young and fit, an athlete instead of a middle-aged actor resting for eternity.

He admitted to himself that actors were not the first occupational group to be thrown aside by technical progress and deskilling. Factory machines had made the master cutlers redundant, turning them into unskilled workers. The domestic weavers had been driven out of business, no longer able to work at home. Stage-coach drivers had retrained as locomotive drivers or found themselves doing menial jobs instead of the prestigious occupation they had once enjoyed.

For actors, in a way, it had always been a constant shuttle between the two extremes, as they fell into and out of employment. Harcourt had worked as a waiter or a removals man in his youth, and had then favoured office work as he got older. With plenty of free time, he had always taken any available course to give him a qualification that was currently in demand.

It had been typing, then electronics, and finally computers. When the younger students had stopped puzzling over what to make of him, and had been surprisingly impressed to hear that he was an actor, they had initiated him into the illicit uses to which his new skills could be put.

Harcourt had been ready to learn; it was subversive, and he belonged to a profession which had never been regarded as respectable. In earlier times actors had been whipped out of town at the cart's tail; how these ancient sheriffs and magistrates must be laughing now in hell at the sight of every actor in the world being whipped off the stage for ever. Harcourt would avenge himself and his comrades yet.

If he had set up his virus correctly, it would roar through the PanOdeon network carrying his voice and image, so that every scene presented would feature William Harcourt, declaiming to Richard Burbage in the Globe Theatre, duelling with David Garrick at Drury Lane, pushing aside Laurence Olivier at Stratford.

Harcourt looked again at his young self on the screen, until he was finally satisfied that it was a fit bearer of his vengeance upon the software engineers who had destroyed the theatre after more than two thousand years.

He raised himself up from his chair,



moving more slowly and ponderously than the slender young man he had built out of memory as his monument. Now Harcourt would take an hour to make himself up. If he was to die leaving a joke, a jest that would plague and tease millions as no other joke had ever done before, he would let himself be found in the guise of the greatest comic and joker of them all.

He called up from the PanOdeon the picture of the clown Joe Grimaldi from the early nineteenth century. For once Harcourt found himself agreeing with the scholars who had provided the information for the PanOdeon. Here was Joe Grimaldi with his whitened face, cock's comb of hair, painted eyes, tight shoes and long white stockings.

Harcourt changed into the Grimaldi costume and began applying thick cold white make-up to his face. Grimaldi had taken it from the "lily-white boy" of English popular tradition, who went about the streets behind this mask at night, brutally beating up passers-by for his amusement. Grimaldi had added the hair and the coloured streaks around the eyes, and although every circus clown for a century had copied him, none had achieved Grimaldi's blend of the comic with the menacing.

Before the hour was up, Harcourt looked into the mirror, then at the PanOdeon, and then back at the mirror, to check that he had transformed himself into Joe Grimaldi.

Harcourt once more called up the Swan Theatre, where the play had now come to an end. The audience had gone, leaving apple cores and sausage ends littering the sloped floor where the penny groundlings had stood. The curtains at the back of the stage stirred and shifted, as if somebody was at work clearing up properties and packing costumes.

Harcourt cleaned off the excess make-up with removal cream, and then wiped his hands down on a towel. He would need a

good grip to work the switch on the electricity supply at the same time as pressing the Return Key on the PanOdeon. In front of the screen, blocking the view of the Swan Theatre, he set up the placard he had written in bold black letters: **I JOE GRIMALDI HAVE GONE TO JOIN SHAKESPEARE.** Let them puzzle over that.

He keyed in the commands to set the virus loose, ready to carry his image on a mission of war and destruction like the face of Helen of Troy in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, "the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium."

Marlowe, the dissolute and reckless, would have appreciated the joke. Harcourt hoped that his electronic ghost would one day appear on someone's screen in the company of a simulated Marlowe.

Harcourt set his hand on the terminal of his home-made electric chair. He put the fingers of his other hand on the Return Key, so that they would push down on it as his body convulsed. He pressed the switch.

There was no pain. His face hit wooden planking. Awkwardly, he picked himself up, feeling his body to be strangely light and spindly.

He was looking at an empty sloping square of beaten earth. Around him in a tight circle were rows of wooden galleries built onto half-timbered plaster walls. Above there was no sky, only a vague brownish greyness.

Glancing around, Harcourt saw that he was standing under a wooden canopy supported by four carved columns.

"It's the Swan Theatre!" he cried.

The curtain at the back of the stage billowed and bulged, and David Garrick stepped out in his eighteenth-century wig and breeches.

"David Garrick! In the Swan Theatre! It's impossible!"

"It cannot be impossible, if we are here," Garrick replied.

"My God. Is this real?"

"As real as it may be."

Harcourt looked up at the non-sky again. Of course; a viewer watching the screen of the PanOdeon would not be able to see the sky over the theatre, so nobody had bothered to include a blue sky in the program, but hot sunlight shone upon his face, coming from nowhere.

The curtain billowed out again, and Alleyn, Welles, Olivier and a grave young Shakespeare joined Harcourt on the stage.

He clutched at the doublet of the young Shakespeare.

"William Shakespeare! Am I young too?"

"William Shaxper, if it please you. You are as young as I am."

Harcourt fell back against the nearest wooden pillar, feeling the indentations of the carving under his fingers. Who had taken the trouble to put in such detail?

He had thought he would never have the chance to act again. Instead he had destroyed choice for himself. He was condemned to do nothing but act, on the stage of the Swan Theatre in the memory of the PanOdeon, for ever.



## ALAN FISK

Alan Fisk is a technical editor at BT. His historical novel "The Summer Stars", an account of the life of the sixth century Welsh poet Taliesin, was published at the end of 1990, and "The Strange Things Of The World", set in sixteenth century Newfoundland, was published in Canada in 1988.

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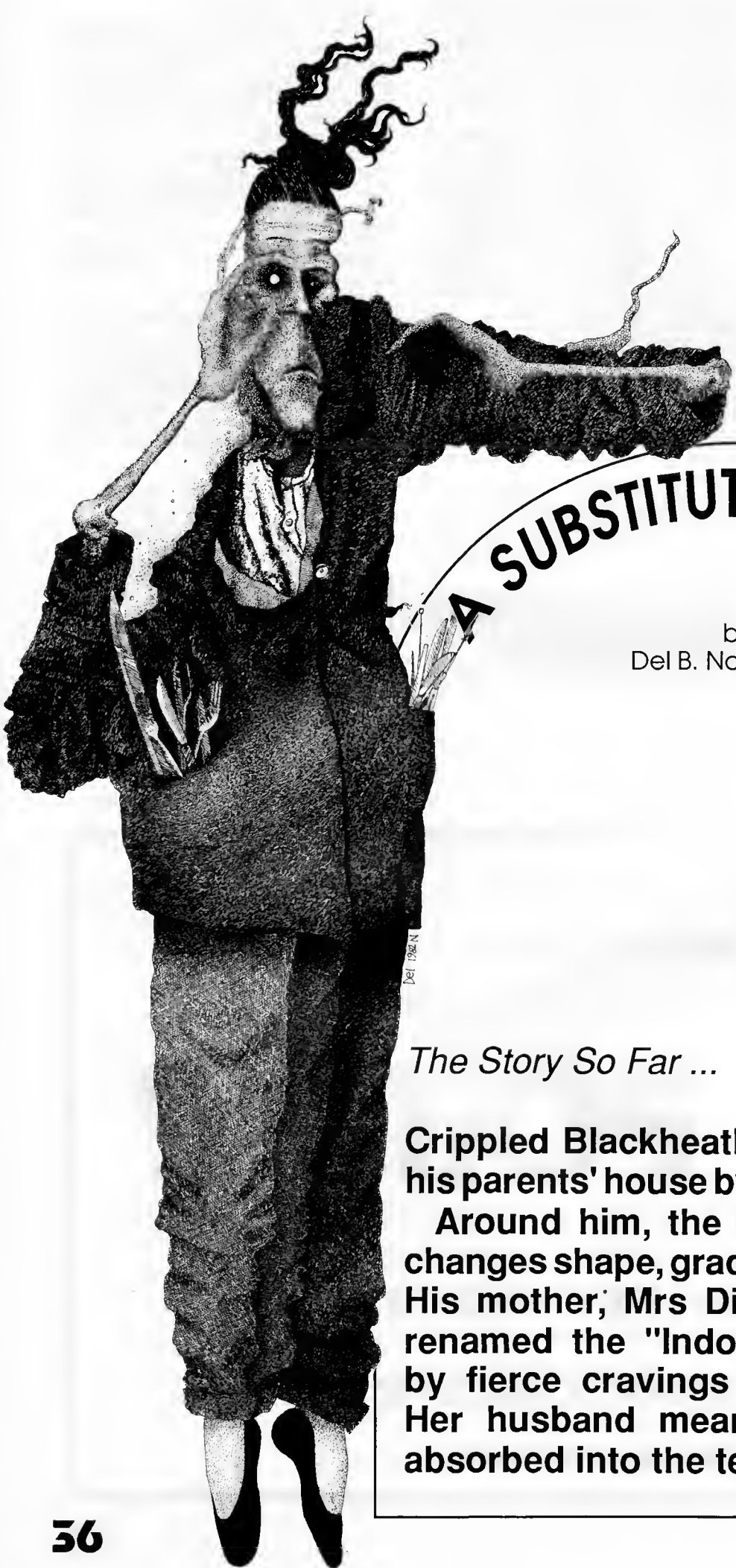
# FAR POINT ?

**FANTASY LIKE IT USED TO BE**

**THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE FICTION**

*See page 7 for details*





## A SUBSTITUTE FOR LOVE

by  
Del B. Normanton

### *The Story So Far ...*

**Crippled Blackheath is stalked through his parents' house by The Outdoor Witch.**

**Around him, the house mysteriously changes shape, gradually growing larger. His mother, Mrs Dinkie, whom he has renamed the "Indoor Witch" is driven by fierce cravings for food and love. Her husband meanwhile longs to be absorbed into the television ...**

Framed in the doorway of the living-room and listening intently to her husband's shallow breathing, the omnipresent Mrs Dinkie might have been a succubus, the illuminated glass chandelier pendants hanging from her religious dress chimed icily in the faint whisper of a draught. Dimming her illuminations, she tip-toed furtively into the room, eyeing the leftovers on his plate avidly. The furniture shuffled aside for her, stumbling and groping awkwardly like vulgar and inelegant dancers.

Soundlessly, Mrs Dinkie stole up on her husband and brushed his cheek tentatively with her clammy fingertips. When he did not stir, she nodded approvingly and reached for the piece of chicken left on his plate.

There was a loud crash then as the tray, balanced so expertly on the other chair-arm, fell to the floor, startling both the dog and herself. The knife and fork catapulted in opposite directions as the plate flew up into the air, turning somersaults as it went.

With a shriek, Mrs Dinkie leapt away, her heart like a caged bird fluttering madly in its dark cavernous cradle of bone. Her husband, seemingly undisturbed by the din, cast a sigh to set the motes of the air dancing.

She stared down at him in surprise. One of his eyes was askance, regarding her stoically; the other slept on, clothed in a rheum-edged negligee of twitching blood-vessels. The aqueous black orb continued to study her (insolently, she thought) until, lifting his head from the chair-arm and staring up at his wife with sleepy, unfocused eyes, he asked quietly:

"Susan? Is that you?"

Removing the stolen piece of chicken from her reluctant jaws, Mrs Dinkie replied in a similar undertone.

"Yes, Onion, dear," she whispered, "Its only me, your little Pussypie."

Raising his hands from his lap and craning his neck, Mr Dinkie prepared to yawn, his cavernous mouth opening so wide that his fillings feared they would be evicted; he inhaled the room until it seemed he would burst. Then, as slowly as it began, the yawn subsided, leaving his body deflated; sloth returned. He blinked back the tears that brimmed in his eyes.

Mrs Dinkie turned the piece of chicken over in her hands. She licked at it, took a timid bite, then threw it down in disgust. The dog, ever alert for a scrap, caught it before it hit the carpet and was gone. Mrs Dinkie heaved.

"I am afraid, Onion," she said in a frightened whisper punctuated with a belch. "Anarchy stirs within me. It is as if the inside and the outside of me were at variance with each other." Her eyebrows descended over the balustrade of her nose, casting an absurd shadow across the remainder of her face, and she heaved a sigh from her cellar. "I do wish they would stop; it's so silly. They disagree, and I suffer."

She sat down heavily at the table, hurriedly assessed the jumble of empty and half-empty plates and dishes, trying to decide which might hold the most. When she looked up, her eyes had filled with tears.

"Personally, I blame the food. The worry

of it all is making me quite ill." She gagged and leaned forward. "I suppose it's funny; I don't know. Blrrgh!" Snatching up a bowl, she vomited violently into it.

To conclude, she wiped her mouth delicately on her sleeve and brushed the spills into the bowl with the side of her palm. She smiled awkwardly at her husband, who was regarding her strangely. Then, rising from her seat, she hurried out of the room.

Relieved to be alone once more, Mr Dinkie turned his attention back to the television and the slow-moving figures who turned to stare out at him as they passed. *They're waiting*, he thought with a charge of excitement which brought him back temporarily from his reverie. *Waiting for me.*

*But how long?* he wondered. *They can afford to wait. I, on the other hand, cannot.*

Mrs Dinkie turned down the ears on the cosie and, as she passed through the kitchen, cast an eerie catlike shadow over the walls and ceiling, which passed over the heavy gold drapes wielding sunflowers of such size and brightness that she was secretly afraid of them. Seeing her shadow pass over them now, undulating in and out of the material's folds, she shuddered and averted her eyes. Gathering up the hem of her shadow, she hauled it in. The sinister faces of the demonic sunflowers, hooded in yellow and glaringly bright, watched her darkly from the hanging folds of the curtains.

*I hate those sunflowers*, she thought. *They make my blood run cold. A hostile forest of callous, gbatng, demonic faces, full of rancour and malice; an unholy bunch, indeed! A stepmother's flowers, if ever there were such a flower. Why, she thought, they could be my own flowers - for am I not a stepmother?*

*Look at them, watching me. Why, should I ever become entangled in their hellish folds I fear I should be choked, strangled, crushed.*

*And they're growing; I don't care what anybody says, they were never that tall before. Growing thickly and tall enough to impede the little light that manages to pervade this otherwise dark room. Why, it's a positive forest of sunflowers!*

*Perhaps they are called 'Sunflowers' because they grow firstly to obscure and, finally, to replace the sun. I shall have to keep an eye on them. I don't know what their motive is, but I suspect they may be spies, possibly working for Her - the 'Other' Witch, the Outdoor Witch.*

*Could they walk, they might stalk me, murder me in my bed.*

Mrs Dinkie shrank from the thought that the sunflowers could be watching her, waiting for an opportune moment to reach out and drag her into their midst.

*I should hate to be alone with them*, she thought. Then, realizing that she was alone with them, she gave a sudden throttled cry and hurried out of the room.

On her way upstairs, she peered into the living-room again to check on her husband. Seeing him asleep in front of the television, she decided to sneak up and give him a big kiss. But as she approached he awoke with a start at the sound of her indrawn breath

inches from his face - but too late!

"Ugh!" he cried, wiping her kiss from his face.

Mrs Dinkie's eyes filled with tears and she turned away. *Love is like a helter-skelter*, she thought sadly. *It's all downhill after the first five minutes.*

"You kissed me!" gasped her husband, spitting onto the carpet again and again "How will I ever wipe myself clean of it?"

"It was only a kiss!" she reasoned.

"When I want a kiss I'll ask for one."

"But that's the trouble! You never do," she wailed. "I need love! Affection! Romance! I'm a woman! What do you think I am, that I can live without love?"

"Kissing you is a drive downtown in a hearse, a lowering into the grave. A kiss should lead one to love," he said. "Your kisses lead only to despair. The first time I kissed you I knew I would die from it!"

Mrs Dinkie stared at him, shocked, betrayed.

"Are they really that bad?" she asked.

"Is there no end to your kisses?" he asked.

"Those things that have created in me a cancer that is eating me still, that won't be happy until I am dead."

A thought suddenly struck Mrs Dinkie then and she asked: "Do you love another?"

"I love no one," he replied coldly.

"But I love you," she whispered.

"I don't want your love!"

"But it was only a kiss!" she snorted, turning away from him. Tears ran unashamedly down her face. "Have you ever loved me?" She watched his grey eyelids flicker and fold into the awful pallor of his face.

"You stole every heart at the flower show," he said, focusing on his memories. "But hearts are devious, hearts are insincere, hearts are unkind..."

Bewildered, Mrs Dinkie leaned closer; her husband, fearing her touch, edged further away. He closed his eyes, smiling weakly. "I switched the lights of love off: on-off, on-off, on-off," he said.

She shook her head, confused. "I don't understand," she said.

"Yes," he laughed. "Yes." He started to cough and his wife whispered: "Don't." But he continued. "You were always so worldly, so wise; a realist. Whereas I... I was - I still am - a dreamer. You could never understand."

She was crying openly now. "Did you love me then?" she asked.

"Of course I loved you," he replied. "What did you think? But it was different then. You were different then, I was different. I wanted to belong."

"To me?" she asked.

"To the world."

"Why don't you love me now?" she asked, wiping the tears from her face. "Have I changed so much?"

"We're different people," he said, "on different paths. I'm searching for the moon in places no one would ever dream of looking..."

"What a good idea," Mrs Dinkie exclaimed.

"Can I come, too?"

Her husband ignored her, and continued. "While you, I don't think you know what you're looking for..."

"Food," she said. "I'm loong for food"

Mr Dinkie looked up surprised at her answer, and she blushed. He smiled weakly. "I have searched far and wide, in the upstairs, in the downstairs, in the woodshed, in the cellar..."

"In the larder," muttered the dog, lying between the legs of the table.

"But we don't have a cellar!" exclaimed his wife. "Or a woodshed. We have gas central heating. I don't think we ever had a cellar... Are you sure you don't mean -"

"You see!" cried her husband, raising his arms in despair. "We're as different as tart and toplumy!"

"No, we're not," she said, patting the back of his hand, which had come to rest on the arm of the chair; but he withdrew it. She watched as his eyes closed, folding away inside his face. When she was sure he had gone, she wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Silly old sod!" she said, as she swept from the room.

There was a depression left in the atmosphere by Mrs Dinkie's abrupt departure, a melancholy portrait of herself, a silhouette into which the air refused to circulate, occupying the space which, moments before, she had inhabited before she swept from the room.

Concealed beneath the sofa, the dog found the presence of this wraith disturbing and was unable to eat under the scrutiny of so keen an eye, and whined in deprecation. The image, as if doubting its right to be there at all, allowed the dog's voice to decide; it wavered for a moment and was gone. The dog sighed with relief and resumed his meal with a reserve of appreciation.

Seconds later, he looked up once more, as a low hum filled the room.

Asleep in Mr Dinkie's arms, the television stirred. Switching itself on, it turned its singular unblinking eye on him, regarding him curiously. Across the surface of the eye adverts played, insouciant.

Slowly and methodically, the salient terrain of the eye was peeled back to reveal a dark maw, salivating and ravenous, which opened wider to yield a slobbering pink tongue which probed lightly, hesitantly, the recumbent Mr Dinkie.

The television body tottered uncertainly for a moment as the maw, looking up, quietly surveyed the room before reaching forward to engulf him.

Stepping back out of the chair as it swallowed, the television pulled and tugged until at last, Mr Dinkie, making no visible effort to resist, was raised bodily out of the chair and held aloft. Whether out of fear or excitement, Mr Dinkie, borne overhead, wet himself. The water trickled out of his trousers to make a little puddle on the carpet.

*I would have been smacked for that,* mused the dog, watching from beneath the sofa as his master was sucked over the threshold and into the wonderful world of electricity.

Click! Creak! Groan!

Blackheath hung like a hanged man, cursing and kicking his legs, from the centre of a towering wooden scaffold poised perilously halfway up the stairs.

His sticks, which he had used to assist

his walking, had grown from simple wooden canes into a monstrous tower, a forbidding and ungainly skeletal tower of wood, adorned with knots and whorls of wood, and wearing purple carpet slippers.

Rusty wheels, too high off the ground to be of use, scraped and grated against the ceiling, became entangled in the light fixture as the tower, gripping the bannister with one wooden hand and steadying itself on the wall with the other, took umbrage at Blackheath's insistence to hurry and refused to go any further. And no amount of prompting, it seemed, could persuade the stubborn tower to change its mind.

"Nope," said the tower, shaking its head emphatically. "You can get out and walk."

"But I can't walk," replied Blackheath. "I'm a cripple."

"That's not what your mother says," said the tower.

"My mother is a liar."

The wooden tower tutted in disapproval and scolded him. "That's no way to talk about your mother."

"Anyway," continued Blackheath, "she's not my mother; she confessed that she found me in the park, in a child's playground. Now will you please get along. This is very important."

"Temper, temper!" retorted the tower, uncoiling gnarled and knotted limbs which became entangled elsewhere on its person.

"I refuse to go any faster. I might have an accident."

"I'm in a hurry!" cried Blackheath angrily. "You might be," replied the tower curtly, "but I'm not."

Blackheath hammered on the side of the lofty tower, kicking his legs angrily. "Onward!" he cried.

But the wooden tower only shook its head, a bulbous topknot near the ceiling, in defiance. "No, no and no," it replied stubbornly.

"I insist!" cried Blackheath.

"I don't care," said the tower. "I refuse to be bullied. If you would care to accompany me on a leisurely stroll about the house, well, that's different..."

Blackheath sighed, and slumped down into the wooden tower's gloomy interior, ultimately defeated. "Alright," he whispered.

"And will you promise not to shout at me?" asked the tower, drumming its gnarled wooden fingers upon the bannister.

Blackheath nodded silently.

The wooden tower took a step forward, almost toppled, corrected itself and lurched forward again, painfully slow. Clumsily fumbling at the banister, it descended the few remaining stairs to the hall below, which, having grown with the rest of the house, appeared now to be an avenue or street.

Moments later, the living-room door opened and Blackheath hung in the doorway from his gnarled wooden tower. Confronted by the sight of his father disappearing into the television, he started in horror.

"Dad!" he cried. "Be careful in there! It's electric! You'll get a shock!"

"There's nothing more shocking than this, son," said his father, slipping further into the humming, lighted interior of the television. "But I'm not afraid. Tell your mother not to worry." His voice began to fade. "I'll

be fine..." When he spoke again he sounded a train journey away. "There's somebody here... I think it's Her... Goodbye, son... Goodbye..."

"Dad, no!" cried Blackheath, reaching towards the television. "That's-"

Then he was gone. The television switched itself off and the monochrome images faded, the sonorous voices died; it sank back onto its stand in the corner.

Quickly, Blackheath crossed the room on his rickety spiderlike tower and switched the television back on, waiting anxiously as it warmed up.

"Dad?" he called. "Dad?"

The dog crawled out from beneath the sofa and stretched his legs; he wrung his hands in condolence.

"What mischief!" he barked. "What outrage! She always said it would happen. He sits too close." He slumped into Mr Dinkie's armchair and watched as Blackheath tried the other channels. "Will there be a funeral?" he asked. "I shall wear black." Blackheath stared at him.

"I've seen her, you know - your father's girlfriend. She lives in the furniture; like the bugs."

Blackheath snorted in disbelief.

"She does," insisted the dog. "I've seen her, heard her. She's not as pretty as your mother: a grim-faced old hag, half as old as death."

He indicated to a corner of the room. "She stood over there in that corner for such a long while. She looked so pained, so unhappy. Then, as I approached her, she turned and stared back at me for a moment. Her eyes seemed to reflect a candleflame where there was none. I thought that she must be a dream for she vanished in an instant. But I've seen her since wandering in and out of the furniture like a misplaced character from someone's nightmare. She may be one of the undead, an eldritch beast, a vampire."

"Oh, don't be so ridiculous!" scoffed Blackheath. "There are no ghosts, no monsters."

"And what do you know," cried the dog, turning and baring his teeth. "Why is it so hard to believe: that a woman can live in the furniture?" he snarled. "And what are we, if not monsters? Look at yourself - with one foot in the grave and the other in the womb, you chase about your imagination like a fugitive, creating havoc and terror at home, dragging the house and everyone in it with you, in limbo. And your dear mother -"

"No!" Blackheath refused to listen.

"She's a monster. You said so yourself!"

Blackheath shook his head, turned away.

"And your poor father - a self-imposed exile for years - has shelved his own life to live in death with another, *inside* the television! But you deny it, refuse to believe!" He looked up from his lap, his eyes filled with tears. "And now something dreadful is happening, Blackheath - to me! Something awful, something wicked, something terribly wrong! Everything is moving within me, changing, being re-arranged. I'm not a dog anymore. I'm something else, something between... If it's not you..."

"How can I be at fault?" cried Blackheath. "How could I know? I'm only a child!"

"You're more than just a child," said the



dog, narrowing his black eyes. "Just what are you, older than your mother, darker than the grave?"

"A child," answered Blackheath. "I'm a child. It's what I know best, what I've always been, what I'll always be."

The dog threw back his head and shook with mocking half laughter, half bark. "And I'm a dog," he sneered. "Look at me! I am a dog! Would you believe it?"

Blackheath turned to go.

"And I want to remain a dog," he whimpered. "Help me stay a dog. Don't let me change; I don't want to be a man. I'm not a man. How can I possibly be a man?"

With elbows akimbo and awkward twisted movements, Blackheath dragged himself across the room on his ungainly tower.

"How can you *not* believe?" cried the dog. "How is it possible?" Then he was alone, listening to his unanswered questions resound in the veiled silence of the room. He slumped back into his master's chair with a despairing sigh. Somewhere, a floorboard creaked as footsteps converged on the landing to chase a shadow up the stairs.

Glancing down at his hands, which had become strangely malformed during his irreversible and unwilling transition from dog into man, he could see dark veins pulsing beneath his wan, translucent skin. He broke down then, and quietly wept.

"It's happening!" he sobbed. "Just as I feared! I'm changing! I won't be a doggie anymore! I'll be a man and I'll have to go out to work! No more lounging around the house, no more cuddles and pats!" His voice tore at the silence like a cat at the curtains. "How terrible! How dreadful! What malice is afoot? What devilry? What bane?"

As Blackheath climbed the stairs, his thoughts weighed him down so heavily that when he looked up he found he had walked on past the landing and had entered the dark stairwell.

The attic, harbourer of so many of his nightmares, was anchored just beyond the stairwell, and he was reluctant to proceed any further, fearing the heavy curtain of darkness and what lurked within its folds.

Finally, he pushed open the attic door and stepped into the musty attic-room, insulated with dust, where his mother stored their dark past.

The wooden tower trod softly in the dust, careful not to stir it up. But his mere presence in the loft, where he had not visited for many years, woke in him memories he thought had been lost forever. Yet the past can never be regained completely, is never as vivid as before, and the taste was bland. His enthusiasm waned, his excitement dimmed and he was left filled with an aching melancholy.

As he passed, he rocked a green rocking horse, wiping the dust from its flaming orange mane, and it responded as he thought it would with a familiar creak, reminding him of the many hours they had spent and of the fun they had had together.

*When I was a boy?* he wondered. *Here? I only remember the nightmares in which you helped me escape from my mother, he whispered. Those terrible nightmares in which she starred, visiting me every night, in different guises, causing me flesh to*

*creep, my blood to run cold.*

Memories swirled about him demanding to be noticed, causing him to feel dizzy and light-headed. The wooden tower stumbled in the darkness and almost fell, but reached out with gnarled and thorny limbs to steady itself and quickly regained its balance.

In his two-towered hat, his twilight tights and golden Moorish slippers, he clung to the dim interior of the wooden tower, frail, yet curiously protected by the menacingly tall scaffold, as it arched and careered about in the fusty attic.

Wiping the grime from a window-pane, Blackheath peered out at the back garden, where a stranger was swinging on the child's swing. She was rain-sodden, her hair clawing the rain as she swung pendulously towards the house, buckling as she rode away.

He thought for a brief moment that it was his mother, but he knew that his mother would never play in the garden. And never in the rain!

He stared down at her. It was not his mother, but somebody else. Someone he knew, yet did not know.

And she had seen him, too.

She shook her face up at him angrily, a knotted map of scowls and grimaces bordering her dark, bullet-like eyes.

"You thief!" she screamed. "You vagabond! You stole my plaything. The un-seagull was mine! Now you'll cop it! The sentence is death!"

Unable to hear her ravings through the closed attic window, Blackheath unbolted the latch and drew it open. "Hello!" he called, smiling and waving down at her.

She gasped at his insolence and turned her face into the rain. *An alcoholic word*, she thought, scratching the plaster on her knee where she was burned by honey; the plaster she stole off a corpse. *He's trying to get me drunk! Fizz, pop and wallop, if he ain't!*

When she opened her mouth to speak again, it was to pronounce every last word perfectly, thereby proving to him that he could never hope to drug her with mere words. But to achieve this she had to space every syllable so widely apart that it made her decelerated threats incoherent and inaudible.

"You snail's funeral!" she screamed, plowing a furrow of anger through the hissing rain. "I'm going to drop an anvil on your shadow and bite your dreams! Trail you like a satellite!"

It was her then, he realised. The Outdoor Witch!

"I'll get a bucket and bleed you into it!" she yelled, rushing to and fro in the rain, a grotesque pendulum of meat and madness. "Electrocute you until your brain snores! Dance on your intestines and demand you eat from my potty! I'll wade through your blood and leave no bone unturned!"

Lightning tore at the troubled sky, illuminating both Blackheath and the crazed Outdoor Witch as the swing carried her up to the attic window, bringing them face to face in a moment of suspended timelessness.

"When you're least expecting it," she whispered, so close that he felt her warm breath on his cheek, "I'm going to reach up and pluck out your heart!"

And then she was gone, back to the garden and the approaching night, back to the storm from whence she came.

"If I poured honey over my bonnet," mused Mrs Dinkie, as she entered the kitchen, "I could attract hundreds, perhaps thousands, of bees. They could whisper their secrets to me and I, in turn, would keep house for them. I could cook and clean, become their Queen. And, if they wanted to mate, they could mate with me. I would tend their pupae and read them stories at bedtime."

"It's Tiddy P.M.," announced the clock. The dog sat up in his basket and looked about nervously.

"Why, not a minute goes by that I don't think of food," she lamented. "Food is a sublime obsession. I can think of nothing else. Time," she added wretchedly, "is irrelevant. There is no time. Yet I feel miserable. This accursed obsession tires me out and denies me sleep."

She stared across the wide expanse of patterned linoleum at the fridge, looking for all the world as if someone had dumped it in an abandoned car park, for the kitchen had grown since she was here last. Hurrying across to it, she rattled the padlock. Good, she thought. *It's still locked.*

*How the room had grown!* she thought. *Whatever can have happened! You couldn't swing a cat in here yesterday. Now look at it! Nothing's within reach anymore; everything's moving out to the suburbs.*

*I can't contain it any longer. I feel threatened, uncomfortable in my own kitchen. Rooms don't expand without good reason.*

The kitchen reached as far as the eye could see; the floor became the horizon, shoreless and uncircumscribed, a linoleum sea, and the fridge, white and barren, a padlocked uninhabited island, visible only on clear days.

Someone was rearranging the furniture, she decided, drawing back the walls to observe her. Either that, or the house was expanding - but surely that was ridiculous, wasn't it?

*There are so many strange and unexplainable things happening in this charmed house at the moment*, she mused, walking across the capacious floor-space to the sink, which appeared to rear up in front of her like some ancient monument.

"I shall write a book," she decided. "*The Philosophy of Food; the Imaginary Science of Nectar and Ambrosia*" - when that which is imagined becomes reality, and reality becomes obsolete."

She stopped in her tracks.

Looking up, the sink rose majestically above her like a mausoleum or a church and if she continued walking she would enter the dark abyss beneath the sink where she knew she kept the Flash and Ajax, the Windolene, Daz and carbolic soap.

Then, as if in a dream, the larder door swung open. From a wound of darkness gaping in the wall's flesh, Mrs Dinkie was greeted by a paean of rejoicing from the foodies; their loud hallelujahs and hurrahs, as they danced on the lower steps of the larder to tempt her, caused her face to light up and her mood to brighten.

"Eat us!" they pleaded. "Eat us, Mrs Dinkie! But be quick! Be quick!"

Mrs Dinkie was confused. "But moments ago," she reminded them, "you all ran away and I had to chase you. And now... now you're..."

"Happy!" they cried in the diluted voices of shrimps and maggots. "We're happy that you're still here, that you haven't stopped loving your little foodies, and that you're still as hungry as ever! We've been bad little foodies, haven't we, Mrs Dinkie? Naughty, wicked food, teasing you like that. And we're all very sorry. We'd *like* you to eat us now. Oh, please... won't you eat us? Eat us and forgive us? Please?"

"Well," said Mrs Dinkie, uncertain. "I don't know..."

"You don't love us!" wailed the wicked food. "That's what we feared! You can't forgive us! We've been bad little foodies and now you're going to make us suffer!"

Mrs Dinkie sobbed and fought back a tear.

"Of course I'll eat you!" she cried, running over and scooping them up off the bottom step. She crammed them into her mouth in great handfuls and, in an orgy of gluttony, bit and tore voraciously at their tender flesh. "You adorable little foodies! I'd forgive you anything!"

"Oh, Mrs Dinkie, you've made us so happy! We love you, Mrs Dinkie!"

But after ten minutes of dispatching as much food as she could lay her hands on, she stopped. She fought to catch her breath, her eyes watering, and belched. The wicked food watched her from the step, waving their arms to gain her attention. The tiny arms of crumbs waved frantically from her lap, desperate to be noticed.

But she had eaten so much, she could eat no more. She belched again, and heaved.

"You *don't* love us!" cried the wicked food. "You don't really care at all! You were just saying that! If you loved us you'd eat us up!"

"But there are so many of you!" she cried, looking down at the variety of food, the different brands, clambering over each other to be eaten; others fought to climb up onto her knees.

The wicked food in her clenched fists, so close to their goal, tried to reach the warm, succulent cave of her mouth, which grimaced and gagged.

"So many little foodies to consume! But I fear there isn't enough space inside me to house you all!"

"You don't love us!" they cried.

"But I do!" she insisted. "I do!"

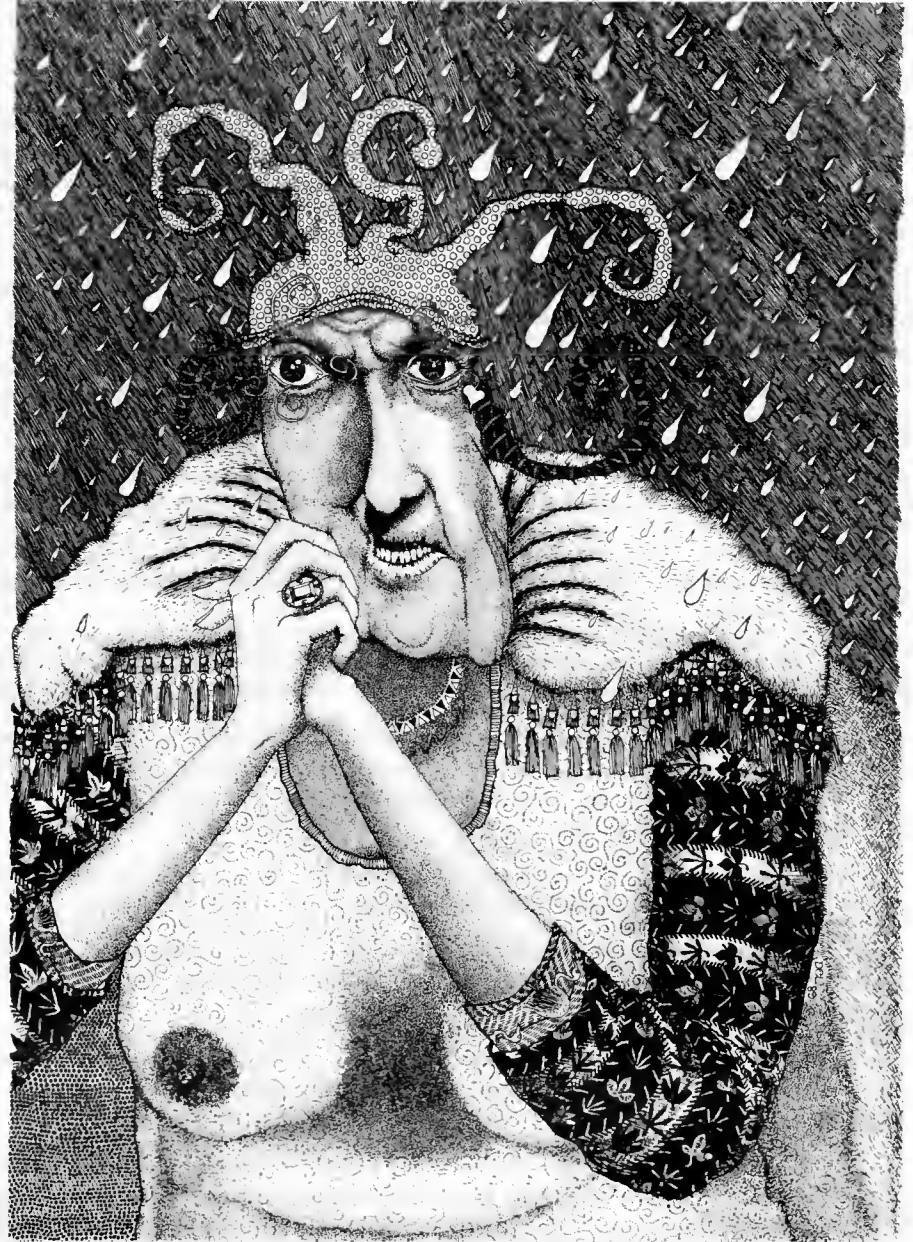
"Then eat us!"

"Oh, you naughty, wicked foodies!" chortled Mrs Dinkie, forcing herself to eat another mouthful. "How can I refuse you anything!"

Eek-eek-eek.

The swing creaked and groaned beneath her, the rusty chains moaning as she pushed furiously in the seat, insisting it carry her higher. She threw back her head to emit a challenging scream, gnashing together yellowed teeth, glistening with saliva.

Gripping the chains firmly with calloused hands, she fought back the storm with a snarl, pushing aggressively, selfishly, into



the needles of rain descending in shimmering strands with the night.

Her hair clung wetly to her face. Beneath her heavy brow, black eyes burned like furnace windows fiercely, the fuel to ignite her anger. She bore down upon the crooked, unimpressive little house into which her unseagull had been taken and towards which she now swung so vehemently.

Raising her face towards the dark attic window, she tightened her grip on the swing's rusty chains and swung harder.

Eek-eek-eek.

The storm grew in intensity, rattling the windows in their wooden frames as rain danced on the glass. For a moment, she descended with the darkness, a fierce and resplendent witch impaled on the storm.

Smacking her lips, she yodelled up at the dark attic window:

"Olly-olly-olly!"

Her raven eyes darted from window to window, but not a light flickered, not a shadow stirred. The curtains refused to tremble, the windowpanes bore no shrouded mien, no misted exhalation of bated breath.

Unable to comprehend the powers which she thought she manipulated,

but which, in fact, manipulated her, she blinked away the rain hanging from her eyelashes and muttered a meaningless incantation as she stirred the powers in her greyhaired box with an old wooden spoon, on which had been carved sacred and magical symbol of the cabbala, of alchemy and necromancy and sorcery.

The black of night stirred within the box, and the evil spirits, bound and gagged in ectoplasm and sealed with religious spittle which contained every holy and unholy word to confine them, stirred restlessly.

*"A Substitute for Love" will be continued in FAR POINT Issue 4.*



## D B NORMANTON

Del Normanton is 38, has a full time job and has been writing and illustrating for many years. "A Substitute for Love" is taken from his first unpublished novel "The Trunk of the Hagflower", and is his first published short story. He also illustrated this story and in his spare time he enjoys listening to classical music, Ska and Rock Steady.



by **PETER TENNANT**

Our subject is a woman, a mother and housewife. Those are necessary components of her condition. We focus on her at work, engaged in early morning chores about the house, hurrying to snatch a few moments' rest before the child wakes, blissfully ignorant of the fate that even now approaches in the form of three strangers I have set on collision course with her life.

Her name is Helen.

It is not enough? You want more? You want details? Your omnivorous curiosity demands to know all that there is to know about Helen, all the inconsequential minutiae of her existence, and, in this instance alone you must understand (it is unwise to form bad habits so early in the game), I am only too willing to oblige.

Some facts about Helen.

She is the loving and attentive wife of Mr. Johnson, a rising star of the legal profession, and the proud mother of their two year old son, Paul Junior. Together these three and a fourth, the hoped for but as yet unconfirmed daughter, the silent passenger in the womb, reside in a well appointed house on the outskirts of a city that I shall not name.

She comes from a rough, working class background, is well educated, a tribute to her country's egalitarian school system, the holder of a degree in psychiatry. For a while after leaving university she worked in a mental home, before exchanging the insane for the twin glories of motherhood and domesticity.

She is brunette and in her mid-twenties, tall with prominent bust and hips, in a word, attractive. There is no reason to this. It is merely a whim on the part of the author who later intends to have her disrobe and would rather she were good looking than otherwise. Visualise her as best suits your own inclinations. Ugly or plain, skin pock marked and legs varicose, forty and gone to seed. It really doesn't matter. It's not even necessary for her to be human, though one must assume that, in the absence of other common denominators, this will make it easier for the reader to relate to her.

More facts?

She likes reading, particularly the Russian classics, finds Tolstoy too intellectual but Dostoyevsky just right, has read 'Karamazov' three times. She watches television a lot, more so since giving up work; documentaries are her favourites. She listens to music, preferably classical though modern can be tolerated in small doses. She enjoys parties and going out with friends, to the theatre or to take in a film. She visits her ageing parents every week, with Paul Junior in tow for the amusement of the grandmother who dotes on him. She eats and defecates, drinks and urinates, sleeps and has dreams, is ill and menstruates, attends to all the normal bodily functions that occur with a tiresome regularity. She has even been known to make love in the privacy of her own home, usually in the

big double bed, often on the rug in front of the fire late at night, and once, before Paul Junior arrived, most daring this, on the kitchen table while his parents hammered insistently at the front door. As a child she masturbated and had a crush on one of her teachers, the geography mistress.

Most of the above is irrelevant, and could be as easily untrue as true.

In the kitchen she prepares a cup of coffee. Paul Junior is upstairs, sound asleep or so she hopes. The doorbell chime catches her mid-way between kitchen and living room couch, tray with coffee and biscuits held in left hand. She puts the tray down on the coffee table, makes her way hastily to the front door before the bell can ring again and wake the sleeping child, fingers tearing loose apron and letting it drop to the floor. Before sliding free the bolt she checks the safety chain is securely in place.

Through the open gap, peering over Helen's shoulder, we can see three people. Helen is about to speak, to ask who they are and what they want, but one of the strangers is quicker, hand raised holding something long and cylindrical, shiny and metallic, an object that squirts a thick yellow vapour into Helen's face. She staggers back, gasping for air, hands clutching at face, paralysed vocal chords refusing to scream. A hand reaches in through the unguarded aperture to release the safety chain. The three strangers enter, closing and locking the door behind them.

We can see them clearly now, the strangers. The thing that registers first, hits the eye so to speak, is their apparent uniformity, as if they had all been cast from the same mould. True, subtle differences are detectable if one looks closely, but, in a manner too vague to be put into words, these serve only to accentuate the overall effect.

They are tall, six foot at least, and slender, possibly brittle, one could almost say emaciated. The great heads seem cumbersome, out of proportion to the body as a whole, skulls slightly elongated, scalp covered in black hair that already intimates premature baldness, high foreheads and thin lips, ears pressed back against the side of the head, squat, almost porcine, noses. And the eyes, cavernous sockets that house pupils constantly on the move, never holding still, preternaturally shifting from side to side, sometimes rolling back up into the skull, and not always in unison. Their skin is unblemished, pallid, hints of albinoid ancestry. And they have dressed to set this off, all three in immaculate black evening suits, with white shirts, gold cuff links and black bowties. Two of them carry large suitcases. The third holds the gas weapon.

Look closer and the faintest suggestion of breast betrays the fact that one of them is a woman, data verified by her unmistakably feminine voice. There is no signifi-

cance to this. It is only an attempt on the part of the author to inject verisimilitude into his cast of characters.

For convenience sake we shall refer to the woman as A. The two men can be B and C.

We have taken all this in with one glance: no time has passed. Helen is still bent double, in the grip of a coughing fit, unable to scream. The strangers regard her and it is impossible to guess what feelings, if any, are conveyed by those flickering eyes.

They talk, in a language neither we nor Helen can understand. The woman, A, is quite clearly in command; her whole manner and bearing indicate this, and it is she who is in possession of the gas weapon. Under her direction the two men put down their cases and move forward to grip the unresisting Helen. They gently guide her into the living room - A does not follow - and seat her on the couch, B all the while murmuring assurances in English that no harm will come to her. He jabbars something to C, who disappears into the kitchen for a brief moment, then emerges carrying a glass of water he passes to B.

"Drink this," instructs B, pressing the glass to Helen's lips, his free arm around her shoulders. "It will neutralise the effects of the gas."

A enters, the child Paul cradled in her arms, still sleeping. She lowers herself down onto a chair across the room from Helen and the two men, and sits watching them.

"We do not wish any harm to you or the child," says B, his voice still soothing and reassuring, but the threat is there all the same. "It is necessary for you to co-operate and all will be well. You understand?"

Helen nods. Water has neutralised the gas as B said it would, but she will not scream or call for help now, not while A sits holding the child. There are tears on her cheeks and, though she does not mean to be weak, she cannot prevent herself from weeping. Her eyes do not stray from the couple opposite, woman and child. She does not understand what is happening, who these strangers are that have invaded her home, but she knows that she will do whatever they ask of her, anything so long as the child is not harmed.

B is the team linguist and psychologist, the man entrusted with establishing communication and trained to guide people like Helen through the inevitable trauma. He is at his best now, aware of how harrowing all this must be for Helen and wanting to do whatever he can to alleviate her anxiety, using all the tricks of his trade to keep hysteria at bay. B is the one who cares. He believes wholeheartedly in the necessity and rightness of the team's programme - there is no room for doubt - yet at the same time all his feelings go out to the (he wishes there was a better word) victims, those innocent bystanders caught in the glare of history's spotlight with whom the team have



to deal. He shares quite visibly in their anguish, more so than his job requires of him.

C, the doctor, is a complete contrast: a man who does not believe in what he is doing, and a man without a shred of sympathy or compassion for Helen and her ilk. This seems strange? C is a man of high ideals, a man of principle, or so he regards himself; when first appointed to the team he viewed with horror the work that would be required of him. And he is also a man afraid to disobey a direct order, a man who wears his morality like a suit that he is proud to be seen in but will discard at convenience, a man unwilling to jeopardise himself for something as insubstantial as an ideal, a coward who will always live to fight another day, a day that may never come. C is a man who deludes himself into thinking that he approves of work which, in reality, he loathes, because to believe otherwise would compel action and that is beyond him, and a man who, needing a scapegoat, hates Helen and those like her who, by their very existence, are responsible for the besmirching of his clean white hands. Such a condition is not uncommon. Perhaps the psychiatrists have a special term for it; Helen might be able to tell us. I do not know, and neither do I greatly care.

A is different again, not as intelligent as the others but with a natural cunning and strength of will that enables her to dominate them. She has about her that air of brisk efficiency which usually signifies the military and, indeed, she is a soldier. The morality of the team's mission, those delicate abstractions that so obsess poor C, is not her concern. She would rather consider such questionings to be a dereliction of duty. Decisions have been made by those charged with doing so, and orders given. A is here to implement. To the military mind obedience to higher authority is a virtue in itself, perhaps the only real virtue.

If she ponders the mission it is only because doing so may enable her to carry out her instructions with swifter dispatch. A is a good soldier, and has earned her superior's trust. Of the team only she is aware that there is little possibility of their ever returning.

A speaks, and then they are all talking in that language we do not understand, though if we listen closely odd words that sound familiar can be picked out, possibly French or Spanish. Only odd words mind you; the remainder are totally unrecognisable. Their voices are flat, inexpressive, or perhaps they just seem so to our ears.

When the conversation is over C fetches the cases in from the hall.

B addresses Helen. "You are Helen Johnson please? You are Mrs Johnson?"

Helen nods. It does not occur to her to deny the charge, though by doing so she might have saved herself. Paul, the child, is very much to the fore in her mind, disrupting her ability to think straight, to keep acting calmly and logically.

"It is necessary you remove your clothes," says B, and with those words all Helen's worst fears are confirmed.

She conjurs up images of herself naked on the floor and one of these strange men, perhaps even the woman, astride her. It does not cause the revulsion it should. Inside she feels almost serene. The threat has taken a concrete form, and this enables her to come to terms with it. At the asylum she had once treated a teenager who had been gang raped. The experience had broken the girl's mind. Helen is made of sterner stuff. She will endure whatever indignities they submit her to, and survive.

Then she remembers that she and Paul have been trying for a daughter, that she is not protected. One of these men might impregnate her. They might have V.D. The child might wake to see its mother being

raped. They might, probably will, kill both mother and child afterwards. So many nights.

B senses her panic, as he has been trained to. "We will not harm you," he says, and something in his voice makes Helen believe him. She stops crying, swallows hard and kicks off her shoes.

A says something and B interprets. "Please hurry. Time is short."

A looks at the mother, then down at the face of the sleeping child. She is a psychologist too, of a more practical bent than B. She knows that her possession of the child will ensure the mother's co-operation more readily than any form of coercion or persuasion B has to offer.

Helen gets to her feet and removes her clothes, quickly, fingers fumbling awkwardly at buttons and brassiere clasps. She is anxious to be naked, to have this inelegant striptease behind her. Undressing in front of those three makes her feel strangely vulnerable. In a way she does not understand it is better when she is totally naked. She is shivering, but not from the cold. Their eyes on her body display not lust, at least not lust as Helen and we recognise it, but some other less human emotion that we are unable to identify. Her underwear is soiled, mute testimony to her state of fear. In other circumstances she might feel embarrassed.

A directs a comment at C.

"Keep standing please," instructs B.

C removes his jacket and tosses it casually over the back of the couch. He opens one of the suitcases, peers inside it for a brief moment, then withdraws a rectangular shaped instrument, replete with minutely calibrated dials and a glass panel, illuminated, behind which lies a pointer and a scale. Helen is uneasy, sensing a threat, but a look from A tells her that she must co-operate. C kneels in front of her, reaching up and pressing the instrument flat against



her bare stomach, just above the navel. Helen shudders, instinctively recoiling from contact with the cold metal surface but forcing herself to remain still.

"No harm," repeats B.

Helen gazes down at the man C, manipulating dials, studiously intent on the whirling meter, oblivious to her body. It is not rape that she has to fear from these men, but the thought does not comfort her as it should.

C regains his feet (a look of satisfaction on his face?), returns the instrument to its case. A addresses him and by way of reply he nods, a familiar gesture that seems incongruous when used by C. She purses her lips, then says something. C replies, picks up the cases and leaves the room.

Helen bursts into tears again. She is close to breaking, confused and frightened, unable to keep control much longer.

"What do you want? Who are you? Please go. Please." She forces the words out through choked sobs and tears. It is the first time we have heard her speak and it will be the last.

B translates for A who shakes her head.

"Please do not cry." He takes Helen by the shoulders, gently guides her back to the couch, sits down next to her. "There is no reason to be afraid. We are not going to hurt you. I cannot explain. You would not understand. What we are doing is for the best. You must believe me."

And she does.

And all the while he gently daubs her arm with a moist cotton, so subtly applied that Helen does not realise what is being done. B twists his arm awkwardly, and suddenly a needle and syringe is in his hand. He presses it home. Helen twitches once, then is still.

"A pacifier, to take away all of the pain and anxiety," he promises. "You will feel nothing, nothing at all."

The drug takes hold instantly. The effect

is one of sensory deprivation. To Helen it seems as if she is moving in a dream. B's voice comes from a long way off, the words are indistinct and muffled. Movements are irrational, no longer following set patterns of cause and effect. B's hand will be in front of her face, then behind his head, and in between one point and another, although her eyes do not so much as blink, nothing. Life is a dream, hardly a nightmare, a long and sad dream from which she will presently awake.

She lets B take her by the hand and lead her from the room, through the hallway and up the stairs, A close behind, arms outstretched to catch her if she stumbles, Paul Junior left behind on the couch and forgotten. C is waiting for them in the bedroom, shirt sleeves rolled up to expose long, lean arms, the tie around his neck pulled loose. Linen and pillows have been stripped from the bed. The mattress is covered by a single sheet of silver material that reminds Helen of tinfoil, straps passing out of sight underneath the bed. The cases stand open on Helen's dressing table, her ornaments and bottles of scent, all her feminine toiletry, swept carelessly to the floor. The aroma of expensive perfume leaking from broken bottles pervades the air.

C and B lower Helen down onto the bed, swinging her legs up and over. Straps are passed over her ankles and thighs, her arms and wrists, drawn tight, a final one over her neck, C's fingers checking that it will not obscure her breathing. She is tied helplessly to the bed.

Helen knows that something terrible is going to happen, something much worse than the rape she had first feared. She is scared. A pool of moisture has formed in the centre of the bed where her buttocks and thighs are resting. She wonders if it will soak through the silver material to the mattress below, and is even amused to find herself thinking of such things. The fear is

like a hard ball inside her. She knows it is there, and yet, at the same time, although recognising its presence she also feels calm, drained. The effects of the drug, she thinks.

"Easy now," B whispers, crouching down level with her ear. "It will soon all be over."

He places a strip of thin gauze over her mouth. It clings as if it has a life of its own and when she tries to part her lips to protest Helen finds that she cannot. C has a large piece of cotton wool with which he smears Helen's stomach with a liquid that stings, bringing tears to her eyes. He talks quietly as he works. B replies, looking over at A, but she is gazing out of the bedroom window not paying any attention to either of them.

This is C's moment of doubt, the few seconds indulgence that he permits his conscience before getting on with the job at hand. B is used to it by now.

B bends closer. "Helen, are you listening? He," jabbing a finger at C, "wants you to know that he doesn't think what we are doing is right, that he is only obeying orders. He asks you to understand and to forgive him."

And, though nothing in his voice betrays him, Helen senses that B is disgusted and, oddly enough, she sympathises with him. But C looks so forlorn, standing there, hands dangling uselessly in front of him, clutching the great wad of cotton wool, eyes imploring it seems, that she tries to smile for him, tries to convey a message with her own eyes.

The unplanned moment is terminated by A, turning and snapping at C. He comes out of whatever reverie it is that has held him and is once again a stranger to Helen, an enemy, the brief rapport lost beyond retrieval.

C turns to the suitcases. He produces an object of blue metal, the same size and shape as a hat box, straps dangling loosely





from its sides, and carries it over to the bed and Helen. At one end is a grill, at the other end a set of dials and buttons. He places it, grill end downwards, dead centre of Helen's stomach, passes the straps under her body and lashes them so tightly that they cut into her skin, checks that the hat box, whatever it is, will not roll out of position.

B is smiling. "Soon now. There will be pain, the radiation will burn, but only for a brief moment. It is regrettable but necessary."

C adjusts the dials on the machine and presses a button. He turns away. B looks at him in a manner that is perhaps reproving, it is impossible for us to know for sure, then shrugs, grasping Helen firmly by the shoulders and pressing down with all his weight.

The pain is not long in coming. It hits her suddenly, before she expects it. It is as if someone has inserted a great Turkish scimitar somewhere below her navel and is now methodically ripping upwards, fingers jamming in and peeling her apart. She wants to scream but the gag prevents her. Her whole body writhes in agony, arching up against the bonds that hold it, eyes brimming over with tears, cold sweat on her forehead, and inside her head a madman is howling his agony.

Then, as dramatically as it came, the pain stops. Her body subsides, nostrils sucking in air. But the howling continues, only now it is outside her head, and rapidly getting louder.

A moves from the window, shouting. They react instantly. C snatches the instruments, bundling them haphazardly into the suitcases. The machine is torn from Helen's stomach. The straps are released and the sheet of silvery material eased out from

under her, leaving Helen lying on the mattress.

B approaches, removes the gag from her mouth. "Don't try to speak. You'll vomit." He holds up a loaded syringe. "This will let you sleep, and when you wake you will remember nothing."

He punches the needle into her arm, a smile on his face, no time for anaesthetic, but the pain is so sharp and so swiftly over that Helen hardly feels it.

The three strangers form a circle, suitcases strategically placed between their feet. C says something, to which A's reply is a curt shake of the head. They join hands. And they start to disappear. Helen sees them growing transparent, dissipating into thin air, though she cannot be certain that it is not in fact her own eyesight fading and growing dim as the injection does its work and she sinks into a deep sleep.

And with that we are done with Helen. Even now policemen are hammering at her front door. An ambulance will be summoned to carry her off to hospital. She will lay in a coma for three days and then awake with no memory of this, only a slight burn mark on her stomach to testify that something did indeed happen, a mark the doctor's skills will work patiently to erase. She will wake to a long and happy life, a life that I gladly grant her for I am nothing if not magnanimous to those women I have used shamefully. Helen has played her role to perfection, and for this we are truly grateful, but now the drama must continue to unfold without her. Put her from your minds if not from your hearts.

Now we will require the assistance of Mr Johnson, and, as it surely must, fate contrives to meet our needs for the same good neighbour who alerted the police to Helen's plight also contacted Paul Senior at his place of work.

They sit alone together, Paul Senior and the detective, in a private room at the police station. Lying on the desk between them is a black evening jacket, the same C tossed over the couch earlier. It is Exhibit A. Paul Senior has denied that it is his. His mind is not really on this questioning. He is far away, in a hospital room. The grand-

parents are looking after the child. Helen is in a coma, and the doctors have no explanations, only words of consolation and concern, the 'doing as well as can be expected' panacea. And there are no answers, no answers that he would understand.

"Does the name Phillippa Johnson mean anything to you?" asks the detective. "A distant relative perhaps?"

It is the third time the question has been asked, the only time Paul has heard it; a lifebelt thrown out by the real world.

"No, nothing." And then, "Wait a minute. Helen's grandmother was called Phillippa. Clough, I think, not Johnson. Helen used to live with her when she was young. She was really close to the old girl, always talking about her."

The detective is patient, saying nothing, using silence as a goad.

"Helen ... Helen ..." Paul's voice is choked, hesitant. "If we had a daughter Helen wanted it named Phillippa .... After her."

And with this he breaks down, head in hands, crying hard and long. The detective waits him out, unmoved.

"Do any of these names or numbers mean anything?" He passes Paul a crumpled sheet of paper, a list found in the inside pocket of the evening jacket.

AD2071 Robert Katanga  
AD2067 Chi Kwan Weng  
AD1985 Phillippa Johnson  
AD1954 Peter Tennant  
AD1890 Adolf Hitler  
AD1870 Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov  
AD571 Mohammed  
BC6 Jesus bar Joseph.

Paul studies the list, but it means nothing to him. He has never heard of any of them, and of course he never will.

It is a strange case, perhaps the strangest the detective has ever encountered. The only real clue is a list of names and numbers that seem meaningless. He shakes his head in puzzlement, like a mathematician with an equation that won't balance or a reader with a story the precise point of which is eluding him. Then it comes to him. Maybe it's in code. He looks at the paper again, scales falling from his eyes. Yes. Maybe it's a cryptogram.



## PETER TENNANT

Peter Tennant was born in 1954 and has lived in Norfolk all his life. His first published story was "The Conquest Of Earth" in Jennings Magazine No 6, printed as a runner up to Stephen Baxter in their SF V short story contest. Since then he has published "The Machine That Turned On", Opus quarterly No 4., "The Upragmatic Gesture", Exuberance No 3., and "The Healer", Dream No 29. He has work awaiting publication in Memes, Exuberance, The Rattler's Tale and Auguries. He is an occasional book reviewer and a persistent letter hack. His current favourite authors include Tom Robbins, Samuel Delany, Tim Powers and James P Baylock. He also writes poetry and creates artwork, having twice exhibited at St. Gregory's Art Centre in Norwich with the painter Graham Gooda.



# THE MIDLIST

by CHARLES STROSS



**T minus 19 days 8:23 am**

For Nigel Frogland, the apocalypse started with a letter.

He stumbled downstairs towards kitchen and coffee percolator, pausing by a door to yawn widely and grab the daily influx of bills and overdrawn bank statements from the letter box. This was an automatic reflex, as vital to the author as flapping its wings was to a headless chicken; he blinked sleepily at the three envelopes in his hand before staggering into the kitchen to wait for the kettle. *Two bills*, he thought, *but what's this? Looks like it's from Victoria ...* he reached for the bread knife. Letters from Victoria Bergdorf, his editor, were always worth reading no matter which side they were buttered on.

But he was in for a surprise.

*Dear Nigel,*

*As you are aware, we at Schnickel and Bergdorf have prided ourselves for fifty years on our commitment to fundamental literary values, providing the best service possible to the public and our authors. This is a tradition which we are - we think justifiably - proud of, and intend to continue for the foreseeable future.*

*However, given the recent changes that have taken place in the genre market, specifically the contraction of the midlist under the financial pressure of competing in a modern, thrusting business environment, we have found it necessary to enter a temporary phase of retrenchment. Specifically, the directors have approved the sale of a controlling shareholding in this company to the multinational holding corporation Spart-Dibbler PLC. Pending the resolution of this takeover, we will be unable to commission any more projects from you. This transition period should last for approximately six months; thereafter we will resume buying as usual.*

*Yours sincerely...*

*Oh shit!* pondered Nigel, his stomach churning unpleasantly as he pondered the likely consequences. *What if I have to ask for my old job back?*

**T minus 19 days 10:14am**

"They're going to *what*?" demanded Victoria Bergdorf.

Jonathan Smiddler yawned widely, displaying a coffee-stained tongue. "They're going to drop half the list," he repeated tiredly. "They figure if they can put the money together and get one best seller, it pays better than the whole lot of them. I mean, why not?" He yawned again, looking decidedly hollow-eyed; a common feature to all the survivors of the takeover.

Victoria leaned forward across her desk.

"I never thought the bastards had the guts," she hissed. "Jesus Christ on a crutch - they're going to put all our writers on the street! They can't be serious!"

Jonathan leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "But they are. Blame the accounts department - there's more profit in one best seller than in a dozen small titles. People don't ready any more, or they read what they see advertised on television, right? Jeffrey Archer, Isaac Asimov. We're competing with other media, Victoria, that's what Spart-Dibbler's accountants are on about. And if we can't make as much profit as satellite television, we're gonna get it in the neck."

Victoria shook her head. "I've been in this trade for twenty years," she said; "and my father before me for thirty more ..."

Jonathan leaned back tiredly. "So have I," he reminded her. "That's why you put me in charge of the horror list, isn't it? Look, if the cash flow had been any better ..."

"It's no good," she said, gazing at the wall of books behind him; the wall of novels she had personally brought to market, making her personal impact on the history of English literature ... "we can't live on maybes. We've got to do something! There must be some way we can increase our readership to the point where we won't have to drop our small guys! Why else did we accept the buy-out offer? We needed capital to get out of the cash flow crunch, but I'm damned if I'm going to let them throw out the baby to make room for the dirty bathwater!"

Jonathan gulped down a last mouthful of lukewarm coffee. "There might be a way," he said, "if you apply lateral thinking to the problem. I mean we're one of the foremost genre publishers left in the market, aren't we? And people *will* read our stuff ... or they would, if they weren't watching Eastenders and Dallasty instead. So we've ..." he gestured broadly, his shirt bulging ... "we've got to recapture the market. We've got capital; so why not use it? We can maximise our readership without selling out or buying cruddy hackwork. There's got to be a way to apply leverage..."

Victoria looked back at him, her eyes narrowing. "What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"I'd have thought it's simple," he said, "once you begin to think the unthinkable. Our problem is that we've got too much competition. So..." he shrugged, pausing for effect; it was a shame that the gesture could best be described as a cringe.

"So what?" she asked, irritated.

"We put a bomb behind the mid-list," he said, smirking at his own cleverness. "I've been talking to some of the boys, and it looks like there might be an alternate option. I mean, our SF types used to do some interesting things before they went full time,

didn't they? You remember what Dave Frogland used to do for a living before he came to us? I've got an idea for a special promotion we can sell to the accountants. And you want to know something else? It's original."

**T minus 18 days 1:13am**

For Lydia Little the apocalypse began with a phone call.

She was sitting at her desk polishing her glasses, wondering if she could afford to buy a new word processor to replace her geriatric Amstrad, when the phone rang. Cursing softly at being called back from avoiding her current master-work - a softly chilling tale of childhood terror and adult neuroses - she scrambled down the rickety staircase and made for the phone. "Yes?" she demanded; "who is it?"

"It's me, Lydia," said the voice at the other end. Instantly her attitude softened, for the voice belonged to none other than Sonia Black, her agent. "How are you?"

"I'm, uh, fine," said Lydia, taking stock. "Novel's coming along, uh, okay ... and you?"

"I'm - okay, I guess." Sonia gave a short laugh and Lydia instantly tensed herself for bad news. "I'm ringing about Victoria Bergdorf, I'm afraid. You heard about the takeover?"

"Oh shit," muttered Lydia. More loudly; "yes, I have. What about it?"

"Well," Sonia said, obviously prevaricating; "it's about the input from Spart-Dibbler, the purchasers. They're re-assessing the Schnickel and Bergdorf lists for commercial prospects, and ..." her voice dropped an octave ... "frankly, they're not nice. They're vetting their authors with the aid of the Economic League - you know, for subversion potential and profit allergies - and I don't know if they're still going to want your stuff afterwards. I mean, hauntingly delicate tales of fantasy or horror from a strongly feminist, left-wing American emigre writer are not quite what the best seller list is made of, so..."

"You mean I'm fucked," said Lydia matter-of-factly.

"Well, not *quite*. There's always the small press, and with your connections - I mean after your time in Morocco - you've got quite a substantial translation market among radical feminist circles in the Middle East ..."

"... Where they aren't parties to any of the international copyright agreements," Lydia interrupted. "Look, Sonia, I know this is not going to do you a world of good either, but do you realise what this means for *me*?" She paused to shift her grip on the mouthpiece, hands shaking with pent-up tension. "This is the end! We've got to do some-

thing or it'll be the death of literature as we know it!"

There was a long silence at the other end of the line, then Sonia cleared her throat. "Uh, there is *one* thing you could do," she suggested. "Now, I've heard rumours ... and I don't want to be involved. But apparently Johnny Smiddler has got some kind of scheme he needs help with, some kind of book promotion exercise. He's trying to get funding from the Spart-Dibbler accountants right now, and if it works, he's going to need someone to go to Morocco. Buying an unusual commodity, as it were, strictly *sub rosa*. I'm sure he's be willing to pay your expenses, and if it works things are going to look very good for you, very good indeed." Something in her tone warned Lydia that she wasn't being entirely candid, but she realised she didn't care; it was her world that Spart Dibbler were threatening to deconstruct, and she suddenly knew that she was willing to do anything ... even commit acts of premeditated hack-work ... in order to hold it together.

"Come on, Sonia," she said; "What is it? Why won't you tell me?"

Sonia cleared her throat again. "Uh ... I don't think it's wise to talk on the phone," she said. "You'd better have lunch with Jonathan ... I'm sure he'd be very interested if you gave him a bell this morning, he'll fill you in on what it is he needs."

"Uh, okay, I'll do that," Lydia said. "Thanks for the tip."

"Oh, and one other thing, Lydia." "Yes?"

"I'd forget that new word processor for a while. In fact, I think it would be a good idea if you bought the heaviest manual typewriter you can find. If Johnny's idea comes off, that would be a very good idea. Because there won't be any more word processors for a while..."

#### T minus 17 days 1.32am

The accountants, thought Jonathan, were grey and colourless; but there was nothing mousy about them. Rather, they resembled menacing gun-metal sharks, smoothly polished engines of corporate destruction wrapped in pin-striped suits and white shirts and filofaxes, armoured in spectacles and ignorance as they prepared to dismember the mortally injured remains of the once proud heraldic beast of publishing.

"Well, Mister Smiddler," the younger of the two said with an elegant smile; "and what is the goal of this proposed marketing exercise of yours?" Her pearly row of teeth would not have been out of place in a tiger-shark's gleaming gape; her older comrade simply sat there impassively.

"Market explo ... expansion," he replied unsteadily. "Basically, we think that our midlist authors haven't been getting the blast they deserve in order to be as successful as they could be. But, what's worse, our market has been eroded seriously by competition from other media over the past thirty years; principally television and other



"Well Mr. Smiddler"

forms of electronic media. This has led to a tendency to concentrate on known, safe best-sellers who will show a steady profit, at the risk of ignoring the midlist authors who might be tomorrow's giants, but who are being squeezed out of the market today."

The older accountant nodded, a glazed expression on his face. His younger colleague smiled grimly. "The profit margins are, shall we say, marginal?" she suggested. "Frankly, the idea of a five million pound promotion aimed at virtual unknowns is preposterous; we could buy two Rober Ludlum's for that! Surveys have shown that advertising doesn't work effectively on commodities with no brand name identity, which is the main handicap of your midlist. They have a couple of thousand dedicated readers, no more ... it's just not good enough. You'll have to do better."

Jonathan didn't let her hostility faze him. He smiled broadly. "But I am," he said. "This is no ordinary promotion! If this one works, the market for books will *explode* - every one of those authors will be turning a hundred thousand a year in profit within three months if we go ahead!"

Suddenly the older accountant sat up stiffly, all traces of inattention fading from his face. "Did somebody mention *profits*?" he croaked.

Jonathan nodded very seriously. "You say the product lacks brand name identity," he said, "so I've come up with a campaign that lacks brand name identity too! An anonymous, five million pound project to *blow up* ... er, increase ... book sales in the UK by over a thousand percent!"

The younger accountant leaned forward intently, eyes shining with something re-

motely approaching lust. "You'll have to be more specific, Mister Smiddler," she purred. "We obviously can't release liquidity for a high risk, non-specific project without a better idea of what they're going to be investing in, yah?" But, Jonathan saw, she was already fiddling with the binding on her filofax, revealing naked, crisp sheets of paper within, vulnerable to the intimate scribbling of her pen; he had a captive audience.

"It's like this," he began. "Do either of you know anything about the consequences of Electro-Magnetic Pulse?"

#### T minus 17 days 4:10pm

For Dave Greenberg, the apocalypse arrived with a ballistic missile.

*It wasn't like this working for NASA*, he thought angrily as the overloaded graphics workstation crashed for the third time that morning. Assorted runic sentences crept up the screen as the computer began the lengthy re-boot sequence; *why can't I just jack this job in and write full time?* he wondered. But the answer was clear. For one thing, there wasn't a big enough market for his hard-SF novels - at least not on this side of the Atlantic - and for another: well, Dave *enjoyed*

designing rocket motors.

He looked around the dingy lab and shook his head. *But not in these conditions!* If only Imperial College could afford to equip him effectively, they'd see what a limey space program could do! But no... all he had was a computer simulation of the Real Thing, running on a wobbly computer that crashed regularly under the unbearable workload of tying its own cybernetic shoelaces. And, oh yes, a lab with whitewashed breeze-block walls in an annex they'd built off a Portakabin. *Gaaah*, he thought disgustedly as the computer gurgled feebly to itself and reported on the status of an assortment of cryptic daemons. *Why did I ever jack in that job with Hughes Aerospace? Whatever possessed me to stop writing about space-travelling dolphins and come and work here? Why did I...*

The phone rang.

"External call," said the switchboard operator; "connecting you now ..."

"Hello?"

"Hello?" echoed Dave.

"Dave! Good to speak to you! It's Jonathan Smiddler here, from Schnickel and Bergdorf. Am I interrupting anything, or can I have a moment of your time...?"

*What the hell?* thought Dave. He glanced at the screen, where the workstation had just about remembered who it was and what it was meant to be doing. "Sure," he said; "I'm not busy. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm okay," said Jonathan, with a note of almost plaintive earnestness. "I'm wonderful! In fact, everything's hunky-dory ..."

"But haven't you just been bought out by Spart-Dibbler?" asked Dave. "I mean, aren't they ..." he swallowed ... "going to axe everyone who doesn't turn over fifty thou-

sand trade copies per novel or something?" "Well..." Jonathan said nervously, "I was wanting to talk to you about that. You see, we've decided we're going to launch a new promotion for our midlist, people like yourself, and we've got this colossal budget arranged! I mean, this has never been done before - uh no, it has been done," he corrected himself; "but only twice, in Japan."

"When was that?" demanded Dave. Suddenly he felt his spine go very cold and shivery. *Jesus, he thought; the rumours are true ...?*

"Oh, around the end of the last war. It didn't catch on, luckily, but we think we've got an application for this kind of publicity stunt: a harmless one, I hasten to add! But the thing is, we want to organise a firework display for the launch, and we were wondering if you could come up with something substantial; around the throw weight of a V-2, for example, capable of lifting a hundred kilograms to an altitude of about eighty nautical miles..."

Dave blanked, switching to professional mode. "Can do," he said; "as a matter of fact, I'm working on the design for something of the kind right now. It'll cost you, but if we buy the parts second hand it shouldn't be too much. I happen to know the Imperial War Museum is selling off their collection of V-2's..."

"Great! Say, would you be able to meet me for lunch this afternoon? We could maybe discuss funding for it. Would you be able to build it part time, or ...?"

"No problem," said Dave, relaxing and suddenly realising that for the first time that week he was smiling. "I'm your man, Johnny! As we used to say at the Cape ... you just got a green bird!"

#### T minus 16 days 3:20pm

"I'm willing to concede," said the junior accountant, "that the profit making potential of this venture is worth looking into. But, Mister Smiddler, there are a few side-issues which frankly require closer scrutiny before we clear funding for your project. Your bona-fides are adequate - we wouldn't for a moment accuse you of being linked with any terrorist organisation, not even the New York Review of Books - but don't you think it's just a little bit dangerous to start throwing around promotional firecrackers like that? Even if they do shut down every television station and video player in the south of England for the next three years?" Her elderly colleague nodded, then began to snore quietly.

Jonathan stared her down. "Of course," he said; "but we're not fools! The firecracker is going to go off at an altitude of about eighty nautical miles; all the fall-out drifts out across the Atlantic before it precipitates. A few cod get radiation poisoning: small fry. We do it on an overcast night so nobody is looking up, and the flash is attenuated by the clouds. Look, my team-" he paused to look out of the window at the misty West End roadscapes as the London traffic geared up for another morning of gridlock lunacy - "my team are *professionals*. They know what's at stake, they're highly motivated, and they know what they are doing! Nigel ... Nigel used to build warheads for Polaris missiles, did you know that? Lydia spent a lot of time in the Middle East; she's got contacts on the buying side.

We've got ... hell, we've got *Dave Greenberg*, for God's sake, the man who re-designed the Space Shuttle SRB's after the Challenger disaster and won a Nebula for the novelisation! Chris Bishop, who runs a software company with Nigel Frogland on the side, has volunteered to program the guidance computers. These people are *science fiction writers*, you know!"

"Subversives and deviants," she corrected him, smiling toothily.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "Yes, but they're useful to you!" he said. "There's a convergence of interests, don't you see? A mutual interest in relieving Joe and Jill Public of that painful bulge in their wallets. Can't you work with them in the interest of the holy dollar?"

"Humm ..." snored the senior accountant.

"But what about the possible consequences?" asked the junior. For a moment Jonathan thought she looked slightly worried, but she carried on speaking: "the potential for us to be sued is staggering! And what if we accidentally trigger off an all-out East-West thermonuclear superpower confrontation scenario? That might significantly diminish our profit-to-earnings ratio in the longer term."

Jonathan sat up and made a steeple of his fingers. "That's unlikely," he said. "Firstly it won't show up on the annual trading balance sheets, so you don't need to worry your little head about it: there's no accounting risk. Secondly, I've had a crack team of cyberpunks looking into the long-term prognosis for the past fortnight, just in case there are real world side effects. They're unanimous; the Americans won't stick their neck on the block for the British, and the Russians couldn't afford to. Anyway, the British nuclear deterrent is nothing to do with the East-West confrontation, it's to do with the French. CND found it out years ago, just before MI-5 leaked it on *Yes Minister*. We've been at war with the French for seven centuries out of the past thousand years, and they've got the Bomb too: so if Whitehall gets the idea that war's broken out they'll probably just nuke Paris."

"And what then?" she asked.

"Oh, I suppose the French will drop three megatons on Edinburgh and that will be that."

"Why Edinburgh?" asked the Senior Accountant, briefly waking up. "Wouldn't London be more likely?"

Jonathan sighed. "Yes, but Edinburgh is the cultural capital of the nation. The French are so much more realistic about these things than we are."

"*Right*. And this campaign is aimed at the affluent south, where there's a greater likely take-up on book sales, yah?" nodded the junior accountant. "Which wouldn't be inhibited even by a low-yield trans-Manche thermonuclear midi-power confrontation! That's wonderful!" She shut her filofax - which banged with the post-coital scribbles of a fiscal orgy - and smiled sweetly. "That's wonderful thinking! So seductively profitable!"

"Are you going to clear the funds?" he asked.

She nodded. "We're going to look into it, yah. It's -" her tongue crept out from between her teeth, pink and pointy and not, as Jonathan had half-suspected, bifurcated ... "it's delicious! Yah, I shall put it to the board myself, this afternoon!" She stood up and held out her hand; her elderly col-

league slumped in the leather chair beside her, snoring softly. Jonathan found himself having his hand pumped vigorously, almost suggestively; she smiled at him alluringly. "Would you care to discuss this further over dinner at Stringfellows tomorrow night?" she asked, batting her eyelids and fingering the lapel of his tweed sports jacket suggestively. "I'd like to, you know. I'm sure further discussions would be mutually ... profitable."

#### T minus 10 days 11:15am

The heat in the airport arrival hall was oppressive, like stepping into a giant oven. Lydia slumped slightly, but forced herself to walk towards the doors, past the moustachio'd security guards with their fingers on the trigger. Near the exit, a short man in a cream silk suit was holding up a placard; *LYDIA SHORT*, it spelt. She made a bee line for him.

"You're Abdul?" she asked. "I'm Lydia Little."

"Delighted to meet you." He smiled behind his dark glasses. "Please come this way?"

There was a Mercedes, waiting for them among the battered taxis with its engine and air-conditioning running. The driver held the door open for Abdul, who got in first. Then they moved off.

"So you are serious about wanting this commodity, Miss Little." Abdul commented. He lay back in his seat and seemed to close his eyes, but in the shadowy interior of the car Lydia couldn't be sure. She felt her pulse running fast.

"Yes," she said. "My sponsors were quite ... explicit about what they want. I have a test kit; we can arrange a mutual exchange as soon as you have the consignment."

"The money?"

"Deposited in a numbered account in Liechtenstein. We can give you a pass to verify this; the withdrawal codes follow when we've assayed the product for purity."

"Ah, Miss Little." Abdul smiled thinly. "Such suspicion!"

She shrugged, uncomfortable in her business suit. "What do you expect?" she asked. "If the Mossad were to get wind, they might sell the idea to one of our rival publishing houses ..."

Abdul shook his head. "It is a poor age," he said, "when the work of poets must be sold at the muzzle of a gun."

Lydia sighed. "Look, let's just get this over with," she said. "Show me the commodity and I'll show you the colour of our money. Then we'll see if we have a deal."

Abdul nodded. "We shall see..."

#### T minus 9 days 11:21 pm

Jonathan thought that Stringfellows was overcrowded and over-rated, but that didn't stop him. Esme, as his accountant called herself when off duty, sparkled in the company of livewire spending power; she was a creature evolved to swim in a sea of money, he concluded, a woman who in past ages would have been content to be the mistress of a very rich man but who now expected to earn it all by herself. She bubbled with champagne and chattered happily with him about work and other things; about cars - hers was a BMW - and mortgages and music and expense accounts. "It's *criminal* what the government is doing to free enterprise, don't you think?"



she asked. "Keeping control of all those nationalised industries!"

"Um, yes," said Jonathan. "But who'd buy them? I mean, who'd want shares in the Ministry of Ag and Fish?"

"You'd be surprised," she said with ebullient tenacity. "If you can make a profit out of Sunflowers, what about rape seed oil? All we need is a financial Van Gogh, to show the Tories the errors of their protectionist ways!"

"Let's dance," suggested Jonathan, who would rather do anything other than dance, except listen to this voodoo economics. "When it's all over I'm going to write a book about it."

"That's lovely," she smiled. "Do you suppose it could be a best-seller?"

Jonathan grinned. "All books will be best-sellers," he said, rising to the occasion. But later that night, lying in her bed and in her double-entry book-keeping system - which had nothing to do with money, but everything to do with pubic scalps - he lay awake for a long time, meditating. Money, it seemed, could be a potent aphrodisiac. And what did that suggest about the future of romance? Perhaps a new genre was in the offing, offering fulfillment to millions of underpaid women who would give anything to be in Esme's office, if not her lingerie.

Esme rolled over and fetched up against his flank. He yawned. "Mmm," she said. "Mmm..."

"Mm?" he hummed, distracted from his meditation.

"Mm .... mmm... money," she breathed.

#### T minus 7 days 10:04am

The manuscript-sized parcel arrived at the London offices of Schnickel and Bergdorf by registered post, landing on the slush pile with the dull thud of another leaden trilogy. The bored secretary broke off updating her desk diary to pick it up and thrust it under the makeshift scintillation counter that Nigel Frogland had set up in the office the previous afternoon: when it began to buzz her jaw dropped and she nearly spilt her coffee.

"Miss Bergdorf," she gasped into the phone; "you've got to come! It's arrived! The, the first consignment!"

"Hold on until I get there," Victoria commanded crisply, putting the phone down. She looked up and glanced round. "Where's Jonathan?" she demanded. "Bloody hell!" She stood up with all the weight of her forty-nine years and headed for the door. "Trouble as usual," she muttered tiredly.

She reached the reception desk just as Jonathan was arriving. She checked her watch; "where've you been?" she snapped.

"Getting into our accountant's good books," he said, tiredly. "Is something the matter?"

"Yes," she said, pointing at the package. "It's arrived! Take it away! Get it out of here at once!"

"Oh," he mumbled. "Is that it?"

"It's radioactive!" gibbered the secretary, who was trying to occupy the farthest volume of the office from the offending parcel.

"Right," he said, reaching over and taking it. "I'll get it to the team right now, hey?"

"You do that," said Victoria. "And don't come back until it's ready!"

"Roger," he said, saluting with a kilogram of plutonium. "I'll do my best..."

#### T minus 5 days 6:12pm

The crack accountancy team who were gathered in the conference suite to listen to the boffins had an air of quiet expectation about them. The boffins, for their part, were jittery with a mixture of anticipation and too much caffeine. It was left to Jonathan to kick off the briefing session.

"Right," he said; "you all know why we're here, you've all been told what the project consists of... now shall we run through the specifics? Nigel, if you'd like to kick off?"

"What? Oh." Nigel fiddled with his hearing aid. "Yes, now as I was saying ... building a bomb is child's play; the difficult part is getting the EMP right. That's electromagnetic pulse, knocks out electronics everywhere, very messy. Hmm." He smiled vaguely. "The higher up we detonate the device, the better. Modern consumer goods - videos, televisions - are bloody vulnerable. At eighty miles, the whole of Greater London and a fair chunk of the south east is going to be reduced to thirties technology, with virtually no loss of life. Sod-all fallout too, if we do it right. That's all."

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Right, Dave?"

Dave grinned widely and sat on the edge of the table; he fiddled with a gadget and a slide projector flickered on, pasting the schematic of a rather odd-looking missile across the wall behind him. "Hi, everyone, it's really great to be here," he said. "Yes, I've got nothing but the best for you! Rocket motors from Morton-Thiokol - left over from the Minuteman program - nose cone stolen from the Imperial War Museum's V-2. Software programmed by our very own systems house; this bird will fly!" He emphasised the point with zooming motions of his hands and finished it by rubbing his bald patch and smiling. "You bet! There was a pop as the projector bulb burned out."

"Thanks, Dave," said Jonathan. "Now the financial prognosis ... Julian?"

One of the accountants stood up and cleared his throat nervously. "Well, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we can see that this estimable scheme has considerable profit-generating potential, except in the insurance field ... for which purpose we intend to attribute it to the Butlerian Jihad Organisation." His cheek twitched. "There are unfortunate overheads ... buying of hot-lead typesetting machines, manual typewriters and plutonium ... but these are in hand and are trivial compared to the other possibilities. Do you realise that there are more than a million video recorders in the Greater London area?" His eyes glistened with enthusiasm. "We must strike while the fallout is hot ... we must launch take-overs for the Amstrad and Sony corporations at once! While there is no television we will sell books in huge numbers; then we will sell televisions and videos instead of books ... and finally we can drop another bomb and restart the cycle!"

Nigel tried to catch Dave's eye during the ensuing grumble of applause from the accountants, but Dave was nodding vigorously and contemplating the inner landscape of quasi-harmonic consumer growth patterns that he'd been designing for his next space opera. Despairing, Nigel turned his attention back to the podium.

"Good," said Jonathan. "So we're agreed it's a workable idea in principle?"

"Yah," said Esme, who, sitting at the back of the room, was keeping careful note of

how her new subordinates were behaving. Her smile sparkled like perrier water. "The board has given it the go-ahead and I agree. Forward to a bright new age of limited nuclear destruction and higher publishing profits!"

The accountants stood and saluted as one. Nigel finally caught Jonathan's eye and shook his head; Jonathan froze, then looked faintly guilty.

"Over here," Nigel hissed. Together they left the room.

"What is it?" asked the editor as they stood outside in the plush corridor of the Spart-Dibbler offices.

Nigel breathed deeply. "Haven't you ever thought that there might be something faintly wrong about all this?" he asked. "I mean, zapping every television in the Thames area ..."

Jonathan shrugged. "Serves them right for not buying our books in the first place," he said. "What is it? Losing your nerve?"

Nigel shrugged. "Nah, it's not that," he said. "It's *them*. The accountants. I mean, once they get the idea they can make cash from nukes, what are they going to do next? Bomb the Vatican so they can make money selling holy relics that glow in the dark? Look, books mean *nothing* to these people. They're just a route to more money. If they realise that they can do without us they'll ditch the publishing trade without a second thought and carry on regardless. So what can we do?"

Jonathan considered for a moment. "Get drunk," he suggested. "Then think about it. Maybe we should see if Dave can come up with something."

"Right, chum," said Nigel. "You're on. Care for a jar?"

#### T minus 0.05 hours 02:00am

London at two in the morning was a strange and beautiful organism layed out at their feet; like a fractal snapshot of sodium-lit hell, an author's hallucinatory hopes for future royalty payments. Lydia shivered. "Well?" she asked.

"Soon," said Victoria Bergdorf. "Soon. Let's just wait for the accountants to arrive."

"Fine," said Nigel, standing close to the edge. He peered over the parapet of the building; a gargoye shaped like a parrot seemed to leer back at him, and wink.

The fire door opened and Dave stepped out. "Hi there," he said cheerfully. "I've just checked with the launch computer and everything's hunky-dory!"

"Uh-huh," said Victoria. She shook her head regretfully. "I wish it hadn't come to this, you know."

"It was inevitable," said Lydia. "Uh, what else could we do?"

Victoria gazed into the darkness. "How long?" she asked tensely.

"Three minutes," said Dave. He sat down on the safety railing and began to whistle quietly. "Launch window in three minutes, folks. Just dig the fireworks!"

"You've secured the plute?" asked Nigel quietly.

Dave nodded. "Somewhere safe," he said. "Don't worry about it. *And* the fuel."

"Where are they gonna watch it from?" asked Lydia.

Jonathan arrived, panting breathlessly. "Hi folks," he said. "Boy, did I have prob-



lems getting away from that meeting!"

"They wanted you to watch with them?" asked Victoria.

He nodded. "Esme was rather insistent, but I got away eventually. They'll be watching it from the S-D office block roof, as scheduled. At least that's where I left them half an hour ago."

"Two minutes," intoned Dave: "this is one giant leap for publishing kind, one small step for offset-web lithography..."

Victoria yawned. "Did you find a buyer?" she asked Jonathan.

He nodded. "Yeah. Those thugs we bought it from didn't have a clue how much plute is worth! I found a buyer, okay. If this works we'll be set up for life; we'll make the Great Train Robbers look like second-rate pick-pockets."

"One minute," said Dave. They fell silent, listening to the beat of some cosmic heart, waiting for the timer-driven missile launcher in a derelict warehouse to torch off, lofting three tons of solid-fuel boosters and sinister warhead into the night-time sky over London...

"Is that it?" asked Lydia, pointing; "I hope you got the guidance parameters right!"

"No problems," said Nigel, absent-mindedly tapping his hearing aid. The fiery streak rising from the far horizon seemed ominously close, almost near enough for them to reach out and touch; then the fire died as

the warhead vanished into the cloud base.

"Twenty seconds," said Dave. "Who did you sell it to?"

Jonathan shrugged. "It was kind of difficult to figure out anyone I'd trust with it," he said. "Hey, look..."

They looked.

Across the city a meteor was falling, glowing white with the friction of its passage; a futuristic bullet fired with the imagination of a group of threatened writers, falling towards an encounter with ...

## BANG

"Jesus Christ," said Dave. "I hope the cleaners had time to get out."

They watched in silence as, on the other bank of the Thames, the walls of the Spart-Dibbler building bulged outwards as if under the impact of some ghostly hammer; the mirrorglass flanks distorted strangely before they burst apart, showering the nearly-deserted street below with the wreckage of the accountants' nuclear dream.

Victoria shook her head. "I wonder what would have happened if it had worked?" she said. "I mean, if book sales really *had* taken off ..."

"Don't," said Nigel. "This way we get to keep the money with a clean conscience."

"Bravo," said Dave, clapping. Lydia turned her back on him, rudely; he could be very

crass at times, applauding his own ingenuity.

"It's still not right," she said. "I mean, what now...?"

"We go back to being poverty stricken publishing people, I hope," said Victoria. "But one thing still puzzles me," she added. "Jonathan. Just *who* did you sell the plute to after you stripped out the warhead?"

He smiled widely. "A very small record company ..."



## CHARLES STROSS

Charles Stross is a technical author by profession, and has sold many stories to - among others - *Interzone* and *New Worlds*. He has degrees in pharmacy and computer science.

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**FAR POINT ?**

FANTASY LIKE IT USED TO BE  
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*See page 7 for details*



# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

As the world grew more technologically orientated, the need for accurate calculations became more important. Astronomers required instruments to measure the angle of elevation of the sun or stars, accurate clocks to time their observations, and optical equipment to improve their view of the sky. Explorers needed similar instruments to navigate across uncharted oceans and produce maps of their journeys. The design and manufacture of these instruments, by engineers, required the use of some quite complex calculations. To make matters a little easier, mathematical tables, such as logarithm and trigonometry tables, were invented. Using these an engineer or scientist could do quite complex calculations with comparative ease.

Although the use of these tables simplified the job of the scientist, it merely moved the task of doing complex calculations to the producers of the tables. The people who were employed to do the actual calculations were known as 'computers', and several of them would be set to work on the same task periodically comparing their results so that any mistakes would hopefully be found before the tables were printed. This was obviously a slow laborious task, very prone to error and in an effort to automate the chore, **Charles Babbage** the mathematician designed a mechanical computer which he called a 'difference engine'. Using this machine Babbage hoped to speed up the task of doing calculations and eliminate errors at the same time. Unfortunately his machine was never built because it proved to be too complex for the engineering of the day, although a working model has now been produced for the Science Museum in London.

It is clear that an automatic computing machine is a very desirable device, but building one using mechanical parts was a very complex task and was doomed to failure. The only practical method - as far as we know - of constructing a computer is by using electronic devices, but it was not until the 1940's that the first one was produced. The big driving force behind the development of the electronic computer was the Second World War. One of the jobs it was hoped to use the computer for was to automate the many complex calculations required to calculate the trajectory of shells fired from artillery pieces, without which the troops in battle could not aim accurately. These calculations were, at the time, being done by humans aided by mechanical calculators, but the sheer number of calculations to be performed meant that the work was constantly falling behind and some more efficient method of doing the work

was urgently required.

In 1946 engineers at the University of Pennsylvania led by **Eckert** and **Mauchly** designed and built the first electronic computer, ENIAC, using 18000 electronic valves and 1500 relays in its construction. Although for its time it was a very powerful machine, being able to do 5000 additions or subtractions a second, it could not compete with the simplest of personal computers used today. Three years later, Cambridge University built EDSAC, the first stored program machine with a 1024 word store and a 4600 word drum store (drum stores were a forerunner to disks). Unlike ENIAC, whose program was hard wired into an externally alterable 312 word store, EDSAC stored its program in internal memory and thus could be reprogrammed much more rapidly.

Eckert and Mauchly left the University of Pennsylvania to set up a private company to design and manufacture computers but to some 'experts' at the time this seemed ridiculous. These 'experts' had estimated that because computers were so powerful, very few would be required to do all the calculations ever called for. One estimate was that six machines could handle all the work in the USA and three would comfortably handle the work in the UK. In retrospect, this is clearly ridiculous, here are almost certainly more than three computers in your street. Notwithstanding these assessments, private companies began to produce computers for commercial use in the 1950s, and the machines gradually became more powerful.

Companies like IBM, RCA and NCR in the USA entered the market with computers, and surprisingly Lyons, famous for their Lyons Corner House tea shops in England at the time, produced commercial machines.

## THINKING MACHINES

At the same time as the private companies were developing ever faster and more powerful machines, researchers were beginning to wonder if computers could be developed to the stage where they could be said to have intelligence. The problem of course with trying to attribute intelligence to a computer is defining what the term means and how it could be measured. It can be said that a machine 'thinks' providing it acts in a way that is indistinguishable from the way a thinking person acts, but how can this be tested? In 1950 the English mathematician and code-breaker **Alan Turing** devised a way of testing a computer for intelligence and this has become known as the Turing Test. To conduct the test, a human volunteer and the computer under test are placed in separate rooms

from a perceptive interrogator. The interrogator communicates with the human volunteer and the computer through some device such as a printer and keyboard or computer terminal. The test is designed to prevent the interrogator from receiving any clues, from the equipment as to when he is questioning the computer and when the human volunteer. It is the task of the interrogator to decide, purely from the answers to his questions, whom he is communicating. Turing himself thought that the test may be passed before the year 2000, and he may yet be correct. To date some machines have passed simplified forms of the test, but no computer has passed the full Turing Test.

In order to take the test, the computer runs a program that is designed to answer questions of a general nature in a way that is similar to the way a human being would answer them, and to avoid too detailed answers where it could be caught out. It may seem that a simple way to fool the computer into revealing itself is to ask it a mathematical question such as the product of two large numbers. The computer will certainly produce the answer very quickly, much more quickly than the average human, but can this test be relied upon? It is a simple task for the programmer of the machine to introduce delays into the program when appropriate, so that the computer appears to take much longer than necessary to produce an answer. It is also possible that the human volunteer is a mathematical prodigy, who can produce an answer in a time not usually possible for a human.

The biggest problem for the computer in trying to appear intelligent, is the lack of background information on, and experience of, everyday life. For example, if I say, 'The man went for a walk with his wife wearing a new dress', it is very unlikely that the listener would assume that the man was wearing the dress (come to think of it, this may not be a very good example). This is because we have many years of experience which suggest that however much the statement suggests it, it is unlikely that a man will go out in public in a dress, but unless the computer has been given this particular piece of background information, it will have difficulty deciding who did wear it. A group of computer scientists in the USA are in the middle of a ten year experiment which is attempting to give a computer much of the background information humans use. Information is given to the machine during the day, and the computer processes this during the night and makes some assumptions based on the data. These assumptions are checked the next

day by the computer staff and are corrected if required. It will be some time before we find out the success or otherwise of this approach.

One area where computers seem to have had success in 'thinking' is when playing chess; in fact chess playing computers are approaching International Master level. **Deep Thought**, from Carnegie Mellon University (not the Hitch Hiker's Guide), has defeated a Grand Master. Unlike a human player, the computer could be said to use brute force, whereas a human player uses judgement much of the time. The computer will look at all possible moves it can make, consider all the opponent's counter moves, then all of its counter-counter moves and so on to whatever level has been decided by the programmer. Clearly the number of possible moves escalates to quite astronomical numbers in just a few forward predictions, and it is here that the computer has the advantage of its great speed; it can project the outcome of many thousands of moves in a very short time. A human player on the other hand can discard many moves using judgment and experience and thus will reduce the problem to manageable proportions.

Intelligent machines, or Artificial Intelligence (AI) to use the more fashionable name, would be extremely useful and would provide us with solutions to many problems. There are many branches of research into AI, but here we will consider just three: artificial vision, speech recognition and expert system.

information, but the character reader would find this extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

The problems with printed text are bad enough, but when it comes to hand writing they pale into insignificance. Hand writing is infinitely more varied than printed text. Even when one person writes the same characters several times in the same sentence, they usually vary in height, width, slope etc., so the problems of making a machine that can read all handwriting are immense. Look around at the enormous variety of styles and sizes that printed and handwritten text appears in and consider how easy it is for the average person to make sense of it. The text can be stretched, shrunk, rotated, mirrored, truncated, stylized (as in the title of this journal), come in a variety of colours, be illuminated as in old manuscripts, and we can cope with it. What chance have we in building a machine that can compete with this? What is required is to design a machine with intelligence so that it can make judgements in a similar way to the human brain, assuming of course that we know how the brain works.

Another application for artificial vision is an area much loved by some SF writers, (robots. Robots are used extensively in factories to construct consumer goods such as cars. Generally these robots are programmed to do only one job, and do it well providing conditions do not change. For example a simple robot may fit windscreens to the vehicles, and will do the job extremely efficiently as long as the correct part is

damage furniture and injure or kill the living occupants in the room. Clearly the domestic vacuum cleaning robot would have to have some artificial vision and a measure of intelligence to make sense of its surroundings and be able to take the correct action under unforeseen circumstances. The same holds true for almost any other form of domestic robot.

Artificial vision is already being tested in research laboratories in screening for cervical cancer where cell samples taken from very large numbers of women are examined under a microscope for evidence of abnormalities. This is a very demanding and tedious job and the hope is that an automated system which would almost certainly be faster, and could do as well or even better than a human at identifying abnormal cells.

### SPEECH RECOGNITION

Speech recognition is another very active area for research involving AI. Human beings communicate with computers mainly through keyboards and mice at the moment, but the hope is that very soon we will be able to speak our instructions to the computer. As most people are much more accomplished speakers than they are typists (imagine a world where everyone communicated by typing), the average computer user wastes a lot of time typing in data and could be much more efficient if he or she could just talk to the machine. The problems facing engineers designing computer systems to understand voice commands are just as difficult as those confronting artificial vision designers. People are very accomplished at understanding what is said to them whether it be said in a high pitched or low pitched voice, spoken fast or slow, or uttered in standard English or with a regional accent (provided it is not extreme). Spoken words tend to be run together as if there was no space between them. For example try saying a phrase like 'to indicate'. This is perfectly comprehensible to us, but is a major problem for the computer.

Speech recognition is available now in a limited way. Systems are in use in applications where the vocabulary is limited, such as in parts stores in factories. Here the operator wears a headset with a microphone and instead of typing part numbers into a keyboard, he speaks the name of the part into the computer. This is of obvious benefit because it leaves the operator's hands free to get on with his job. These systems are successful because there are a limited number of parts in the store and the computer has been programmed to recognise only these part names. More general speech recognition requires the computer to be 'trained' for the speaker, generally done by having the speaker repeat a list of words several times. The computer analyses each utterance of each word and produces an acceptable range of parameters for it. Subsequent speech is compared with the internal list and hopefully a match is found. Even if an absolute fit is not found, the computer can assign a probability to each likely word and can then choose the word with the highest probability. At the moment even the most sophisti-

**At the same time as the private companies were developing ever faster and more powerful machines, researchers were beginning to wonder if computers could be developed to the stage where they could be said to have intelligence.**

### ARTIFICIAL VISION

Artificial vision in one form or another has been under development for many years. In its simplest form it consists of character recognition - being able to recognise simple printed text. Character recognition at this basic level has been used for many years in everyday life: just look at the stylized numbers on the bottom of your cheques. These were designed many years ago to be read by optical character readers. These numbers can be read with very simple equipment, but not all text is printed in this way and considerable work has gone into the design of readers which can read ordinary text. These are available now and amongst other applications are used in book readers for blind people. Although these devices are fairly successful, they are still quite limited in that they can only read specific text styles. If another style is to be used, then the text reader must be 'taught' the new style. There is also a problem with badly printed text. If an occasional letter is lost in a document, or sometimes even the odd word, a human reader will generally have no trouble interpolating the missing

supplied, but substitute a screen that has a fault in it, and the robot has a problem. It does not have the facility to think out a solution to the problem and will generally fit the screen unaware that anything is wrong. A lot of research is going into giving robots some form of artificial vision and intelligence, so that for example, they can inspect parts, check for correct orientation and if necessary re-orientate before fitting.

Domestic robots are another example of a machine where intelligence would be a necessity. The home is not a controlled environment like a factory or a laboratory. It does not require an intelligent robot to push a vacuum cleaner round an empty room, indeed all that is needed is a motorised cleaner with very simple contact sensors to turn the machine through 180 degrees on contact with a upright surface (toys which provide this motion been available for many years and they contain no electronics at all). It is a completely different matter when the room is occupied with furniture, pets and humans. At best the simple machine could miss parts of the room in its efforts to avoid the contents, and at worst it could

cated systems have a limited vocabulary of a few hundred or perhaps thousands of words, and mistakes are still common.

Speech recognition has advanced quite a lot in the last few years, but still has a long way to go before a machine which can recognise everyday speech is available.

### EXPERT SYSTEMS

An expert system or - as it is sometimes known - a knowledge-based system, is a computer program which contains the combined knowledge of a large numbers of experts in a given field. Because of the way the program is written, the expert system can combine the knowledge in ways that a human expert may not have considered. It can be said that the total expertise of the system is greater than the sum of its parts. Expert systems have been written for many different fields including medical and mining. Medical expert systems have been used experimentally to help in the diagnosis of illnesses. Theoretically the expert system should be very good at diagnosis because it can contain much more information than the average doctor can ever hope to, and its knowledge can cover the whole of medicine, not just the relatively small area that the average medical specialist covers. There is obviously a certain reluctance by doctors, and some patients, to turn diagnosis over to a machine, not only because of injured pride, but for ethical reasons. There would be a public outcry against expert systems if a patient died because of a wrong diagnosis by one, but doctors themselves make mistakes.

Perhaps expert systems may initially be accepted as a partner to the doctor, and one day a visit to the doctor may involve a preliminary 'conversation' with an expert system so that by the time the patient reaches the doctor, he has a tentative diagnosis based on the information extracted by the system

### COMPUTER POWER

All of the above examples illustrate one important point: if true AI is ever to be achieved, we will need a massive increase in computing power. Small computers today are much more powerful than very large computers of only a decade ago. Memory size has increased to levels once thought inconceivable and processing speed has likewise improved, but it still isn't enough. A fundamental change must be made in computer design to achieve the required power.

The traditional computer architecture, named the **Von Neumann** architecture, is not very suited to the requirements of artificial intelligence. In it all processing is done serially so that although the computer appears to be able to do several things at once, this is an illusion. In the word processor that I am using to type this article, the letters typed on the keyboard seem to be displayed on the screen as soon as I hit a key, but actually there is a delay, usually too small to notice. The computer gets a signal from the keyboard to say that a key has been pressed, it stops what it is doing and reads the key data from the keyboard; it converts that data into the standard ASCII code that the word processor can use; it

then puts that data in the correct place in its internal file and displays a copy on the screen. During the time that this is happening the processor may also have to deal with other requirements of the system such as keeping the internal clock up to date and making automatic back-ups of the data. All of these tasks are done sequentially. It is only because of the incredible speed of the processors available today that all these things can be done apparently simultaneously.

If some of these tasks could be done concurrently, then computers would run much faster than they do now. Some simultaneous operation is already available even on the simplest PC; for example, for dealing with disk drives. The computer requests data from the disk drive, and a dedicated disk drive processor does all the work controlling the drive, and retrieving the information. During this time the main processor is free to get on with other tasks. High performance graphic work-stations also feature some simultaneous processing. The main processor decides what needs to be drawn, and the graphic processor does all the tedious and time consuming work of putting the graphics on the screen, freeing the main processor for other work. These examples provide fairly small though noticeable improvements in processing speed, but what we need is a large increase in speed.

Parallel processing could be the solution we are looking for. In a computer using parallel processors, the task is broken up into smaller tasks and these are given to many processors to work on simultaneously. As each finishes its job it can be given another part of the problem to work on until the whole job is complete. Clearly if a job is divided between a number of processors it will be completed many times faster, but dividing it between  $n$  processors does not mean it will get done  $n$  times as fast. There is a slight time penalty to be paid in communicating between processors and because some parts of the job may have to wait for the completion of other parts, but a significant improvement will be made. The first commercial processor designed for parallel processing was the Transputer built by the British semiconductor company **Inmos**. Arrays of transputers have been built and can achieve quite fantastic processing speeds.

Another development which promises great improvements in AI are neural networks. These are networks of parallel processors arranged in layers. The processors, or neurons, of each layer are connected to processors in the layers above and below. This is analogous to the way the brain is thought to work, where the neurons or nerve cells are interconnected in similar ways. The weight or importance of each connection is flexible and can be changed by the network as a result of training. Artificial vision as discussed earlier is one area where encouraging results have been achieved with neural networks. For example visual neural nets can be trained to do photo-analysis of - say - satellite photographs. By showing a number of photographs containing the feature to be recognised, the network 'learns' what is

required of it and assigns different weights to the various interconnections. If the net is subsequently shown similar photographs it is very good at picking out the required feature. One method of determining the power of a net is by measuring the number of neuron interconnections. The best achieved so far, using the largest machines available, less than 100 million connections. Although this appears to be quite an achievement, compared with living creatures it is insignificant; even insects can beat this by an order of magnitude.

### THE FUTURE

As was stated earlier, massive computing power is required for AI and to this end much research work is being carried out. As the technology for producing microcircuits advances, more circuitry is being squeezed into smaller and smaller areas. As the size of these microcircuits has shrunk, so their speed has increased, so much so that the length of interconnections between circuits can be a limiting factor for speed (the **Cray** supercomputer was designed in the shape of a cylinder to minimise the length of interconnections between various parts of the circuit as well as to provide a central ventilating shaft for cooling).

Several research groups are looking at light as an alternative to electrons for computers and although some success has been achieved, an optical computer is still a long way off. Optical disk drives are now quite common and provide very high density storage, but these may soon be superseded by new optical devices which will store really vast amount of data in the same space. Superconducting microcircuits, where the chips are immersed in liquid helium to lower their temperature to near absolute zero, are also being investigated, with the hope that they could eventually be incorporated in ultra high speed computers. There are even researchers investigating quantum transistors, truly the stuff of science fiction.

Although we have achieved some measure of AI, there is still a long way to go before machines achieve the level of intelligence of the computers in **Star Trek**, or the robots in **Isaac Asimov's** stories, but we should not be too despondent. The electronic computer is not yet fifty years old and the microcomputer has just celebrated its fifteenth birthday, so we are just beginning the quest for AI. Living creatures have been evolving on the Earth for many millions of years, so it is no wonder that we are a long way behind; but we are catching up fast.

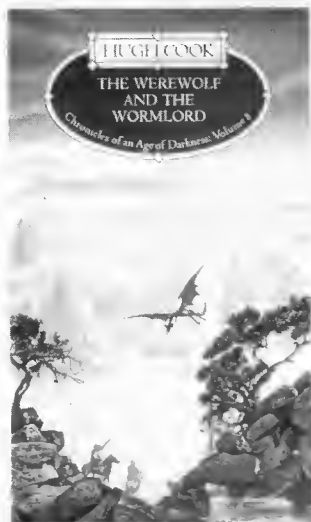
Ed Hunt





# BOOK REVIEWS

In each issue of FAR POINT we'll be having a closer look at some of the new or forthcoming SF and Fantasy releases. This month Kim Cowie, A F B Edwards, C N Gilmore, Ed Hunt and Bryan Hunter are our guest reviewers.



## The Werewolf and the Wormlord

Hugh Cook

Corgi

£3.99

ISBN: 0 552 13538 0

Paperback

This book describes itself as 'Chronicles of an Age of Darkness. Volume 8', which sounds like bad news if you haven't read 1 to 7. On the back it proclaims that 'Although it forms part of a vast fantasy epic, this volume is a complete and spectacular tale in its own right.' As their titles all alliterate on W, this is more ominous still.

In fact, I get the impression

that only the *mise en scene* is common to the series, and fantasy farce would be nearer the mark. We have the usual cod-feudal, magic-steeped society, but on this occasion overlying some fragments of 'a civilisation long since destroyed and forgotten', eg. three windshields from a 'Raflanderk IV All-Terrain Assault Vehicle', now the windows of a penthouse office suite. The present story concerns Alfric Danbrog, bank official, semi-house trained werewolf and reluctant pretender to the local throne, who gets coerced into the usual quest.

The first half of the book is intensely literary, in the sense that it achieves its effects by constantly undermining the sword and sorcery conventions on which it is based, for the diversion of those who understand them. As it's also more original and ingenious than most straight examples of the genre, there's an implication that the genre has entered a decadent phase.

Cook plays the whole business for laughs, combining the mock-heroic with the cynically squalid in the tradition of Lieber and de Camp, but with an eye to James Branch Cabell, Jack Vance and even Peter Tinniswood as well. It shows a noble ambition, though he still has some distance to go. Those

who play mannerist games with the language need total mastery of the grammar and vocabulary. Specifically, they can't afford to confuse lineage with lineaments, misogamy with misogyny, abodement with foreboding or evoke with invoke. Cook's coinages don't ring true either; such adjectives of general emphasis as 'abstrakious' may have served Angela Brazell but won't serve here, nor will such ad hoc Teutonisms as (all in one paragraph) 'imagespasm', 'murdershock' and 'deathfear'. Cook also has the common fault of labouring the point when describing his hero's emotions.

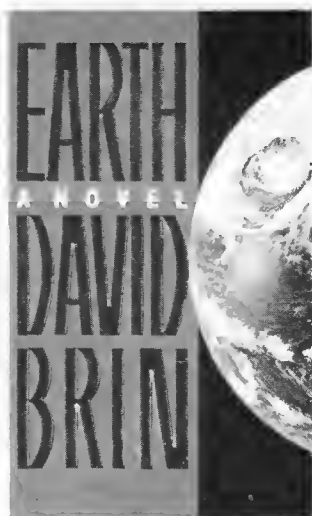
However, there are a number of very good touches, including Qa, a treasure-guarding dragon who not only receives house-calls from the Royal Physician (including six monthly check-ups) but has a properly notarised contract of employment, complete with 'legitimate tax-free perks', lodged with his solicitor. Qa, who writes modernist poetry and justifies his occasional man-taking in current ecological jargon, is altogether a very fine creation. Cook miscalculates badly in killing him off at an early stage, and compounds the crime by racking Alfric with guilt for it. Poul Anderson can get away with this sort of thing, but he didn't try it

in *The Makeshift Rocket*. Other nice touches, including the Ogre King, Sweet Sugar-Delicious Dimple-Dumpling (whose name, for understandable reasons, may never be pronounced in his presence) are good one-liners that get extended beyond their wind but will probably appeal to the children even so.

In the second half Cook undermines the first half by playing the story as a straight conflict between idealism and megalomania, transforming the characters as arbitrarily as the werewolf himself. The quality of the writing and construction rises markedly - enough to excuse the wrenching change of mood - then plummets to new depths of mawkishness, as the details of Alfric's new quest emerge: it is to reduce the central bank to 'an arm of the State'. Where have we met that phrase before?

Cook certainly has potential, but he has made little impression so far, and on the evidence of this book it's difficult to see where he's going. One could read the other seven, of course, but *vita brevis!* I suspect they all show the same pattern of talent subverted by ingrained silliness. But I'll read the next, if it comes my way, with real interest - he may be a hopeless case, but he's an *interesting* hopeless case.

C. N. Gilmore.



## Earth

David Brin

Futura

£4.99

ISBN: 0 7088 4872 9

Paperback

*Anyone who tries to predict the future is inevitably a fool. Present company included. A prophet without a sense of humour is just stupid.*

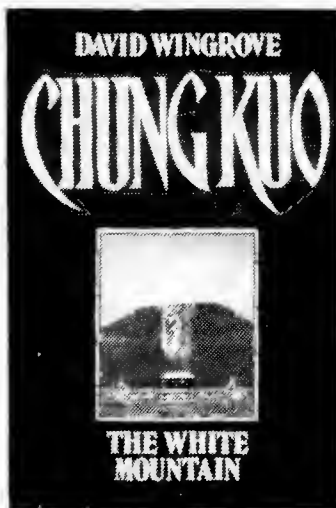
All fiction projects the prejudices of its authors. Some is accused of doing it 'stridently' (which is to say, it gets under the critic's skin). Sometimes the chance would be a fine thing - notice the mountains of 'ep-

och-makingly irreverent novels', full of dreary, ill-written and predictable whinge against whatever targets are currently in fashion.

For good and ill, sf accentuates this aspect; writers gloat over the triumphant vindication of their own ideologies and panaceas, and bewail the evils arising when they are defeated or rejected. Sometimes the accent is heightened further, as delineation of a future society threatens to overwhelm the story - even a story having to do with the threatened consumption of the planet by a black hole. Whether this expresses the decadence or the apotheosis of the novel of ideas,

the writer lays bare his own soul to the fleeing, flaying, facile formulations of the critic.

David Brin is aware of this, as my quote demonstrates, but he goes ahead anyway, using the formula of rapid cut between story-lines of which all may but only some will impinge on each other, to build up a panorama. The debt to John Brummer's *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up* (where the stories are even more heavily overwhelmed) is obvious and acknowledged but Brin regards himself as an optimist. Within the framework of his eco-Jeremiad, he perceives a future in which freedom of expression is not severely curtailed; quality



**Chung Kuo Book III: The White Mountain**  
David Wingrove  
NEL  
£15.99  
ISBN: 0 450 54992 5  
Hardback

David Wingrove's seven-volume **Chung Kuo** series is, for a SF novel, almost unique in its projected size and character count. It has also generated an almost unique amount of acrimony between author and genre reviewers. Shortly before reading Book III, I received a personally addressed open letter from Mr Wingrove. This was the latest shot in a running skirmish between an angry Wingrove and the editors and reviewers of the BSFA (British Science Fiction Association) magazine **vector**. It is evident from various published interviews and letters that Mr Wingrove takes his magnum opus very seriously. In this latest open letter, Mr Wingrove vigorously refutes attacks made on him and his book **The White Mountain** made in a recent **Vector** review and editorial. I do think that the criticisms made in this latest attack were intemperate and misleading, so I shan't repeat them here; but for what I thought of the book myself, read on.

**CHUNG KUO** (= Middle Kingdom = Imperial China) is set in the 23rd Century, when the Han Chinese are rulers of an Earth whose rapidly multiplying population lives in continuous multi-level cities which cover vast stretches of territory. Technological progress has been halted at about a 21st century level by a regime suspicious of any kind of change, and the past has been suppressed and falsified to present an approved Chinese version of 2000 years of history.

Socially, this is a corrupt and totalitarian culture which models itself in many ways on the old Chinese Empire, and in which women are treated as chattels. Surveillance cameras record everybody's movements. Chung Kuo is ruled by seven autocrats, the Seven, each of whom has absolute rule over a city-continent. Those of highest status live on the uppermost levels of the cities, while those below a certain floor barrier, the Net, live in lawless levels where only the strongest and most brutal survive. Below all is the original ground surface, the Clay.

Political opposition to the rule of the Seven has come from a Western European pro-change group, the Dispersionists, who were in favour of developing interstellar spaceflight, but by the time the third book opens this movement has been crushed and is replaced by terrorist groups. The principal actors are the terrorist leader, DeVore; the undercover terrorist collaborator, Hans Ebert; General Knut Tolonen, a staunch supporter of the Seven; Gregor Karr, a brutal major in the Security Forces; Li Yuan, one of the Seven and ruler of City Europe; and Wang Sau-Leyan, one of the Seven and ruler of City Africa. In Vol II, the terrorists inflict disruptive damage on the world of Chung Kuo, and in turn suffer crushing defeats. The old unity of the Seven is shattered by personal rivalry, and there is pressure for the

population growth to be restricted, and a research project is underway to develop means to fit all men with headsets that will enable them to be remotely controlled.

There is a very large cast of characters, many with Chinese names, and Wingrove's method is to write many fairly short sections which usually consist of a confrontation or interaction between two or three of these characters, or a short piece of action. The plot is very complex and involves a number of parallel schemes and subplots that extend through the several volumes. This is only incidentally a science fiction series; clearly the intention of Wingrove and his publishers was to produce a middlebrow SF version of the Family Saga or corporate-struggle or spy thriller bestseller, and using many of the same techniques. Most of the SF elements, e.g. the multilevel city, the computer networks, the identification by retinal pattern, are the common currency of modern SF.

It has to be said that the attempt has not been altogether successful. It is impossible to find any major sympathetic character with whom one can identify and whose adventures one can follow. Every one of the major characters listed above is a ruthless and unpleasant type, responsible for many brutal killings, often carried out personally. There are several scenes in which women are sexually exploited, abused and even killed during sex acts. Mr Wingrove has succeeded admirably in recreating the beastliness and venality of all totalitarian regimes! The prose, while adequately fashioned for its task, is not such that one would read the book just to enjoy the music of its language.

This is largely a novel of interiors. Such noteworthy descriptive passages as exist are mostly of the knickknacks inside the apartments of the powerful, or of the rural delights of their estates. In the same way, one

senses that many of the action scenes are, despite the great length of the series, hurried through rather than suspensefully exploited to the full. Scenes involving ideas such as cyborgs, animated corpses, half-humans and human duplicates which ought to have been striking, get rather buried in the onrush of material. As TV, it would have more talk than special effects.

You don't have to be a statistician to look at the present urban sprawl and deduce that a population of 30 billion "contained in vast hive-like cities of three hundred levels that spanned whole continents" just doesn't add up. Surely Mr Wingrove doesn't mean the English billion (1000,000,000,000)?

The frequent use of Chinese words and phrases in the text may prove an irritant to non-Sinophile readers; the Book III hardback does not contain the glossary or the list of characters. A crucial failing of this book is that it concentrates too much on unpleasant events, leading to a lack of balance between entertainment and message. This reviewer found that because of this, the lack of sympathetic major characters and the bit-tiness of the text, reading **The White Mountain** and the two preceding volumes wasn't any fun at all.

I am sceptical about Chung Kuo's reversion to the customs of the Chinese Empire. The Empire collapsed un-mourned a lifetime ago; my impression of how the Chinese might turn out in the future is that they seem as eager for Western ways and technological development as anyone else.

Most people who choose to read **The White Mountain** will have already read vols I and II. Those who haven't, and think it might interest them, should start by looking at a copy of Book I.

Kim Cowie



**Grounded**  
Chris Claremont  
Pan  
£4.99  
ISBN: 0 3330 31281 2  
Paperback

If your choice in SF is Buck Rogers then you may enjoy this novel, a sequel to *First Flight*. The heroine, Nicole Shea, is an astronaut, or more precisely, an ex-astronaut. During her first mission (presumably in *First*

*Flight*), which is supposed to be a routine year long trip to Pluto, her ship, *The Wanderer* encounters Wolfpack raiders. Not only do the crew of *The Wanderer* do battle with and defeat the raiders, but they go on to establish first contact with an extra-terrestrial civilisation, the Halyan't'a. See what I mean when I said this was **SUPPOSED** to be a routine trip?

After recovering from injuries acquired during the battle, Nicole is surprised to find that

although she is physically fit, she has lost her astronaut's license, and she is sent to Edwards Air Force Base, or AFB to us Fighter jocks, to work with the Halyan't'a on a collaborative project to construct a space shuttle. It is not made clear why she has been given this job but possibly the fact that she is one of the few people on Earth who have mastered the Halyan't'a's (are all these apostrophes really necessary?) language has influenced someone

and expectation of life are high and rising; 'Greener than Thou' politics have supplanted the previous century's Left/Right split, and though black propaganda is endemic, conservationist measures are expedited with a degree of good humour and only limited sado-righteousness - in most cases.

Every tendency creates its own fanatics just as it creates its own reactionary forces, and Brin's exploration of untrammelled eco-fundamentalism in the context of a fully developed information culture becomes far too convincing for comfort when the entire network falls into the hands of 'the sort of vegetarian for whom it's murder to kill a perennial plant'. Her he gathers all the important strands into a prolonged and most satisfying climax, combining features of Frederic Pohl's *Plague of Pythons* with Scott Fitzgerald's *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*.

Brin's major characters are neither mere soundboxes for nor caricatures of a viewpoint; here an intensely likeable Maori conducts an internal dialogue.

'Hey, all right. We made mistakes. But who told us, back when we started digging and mining and irrigating, that it would come to this? No one. We had to find out for ourselves, the hard way.'

*'So where were those damned UFOs and charioted gods and prophets when we really needed them? No one gave us a guidebook for managing a planet. We're writing it ourselves now, from hard experience.'*

*Concealing a smile, George knew how he'd reply.*

*I mourn the moa, whom my own ancestors drove into extinction. I mourn the herons and whales, slaughtered by the pakeha. I mourn you too, little fishes.*

Brin gave us the great Uplift Trilogy of *Sundiver*, *Starline Rising* and *The Uplift War* - but he's not immune to the opredalism which afflicts even the cleverest who choose to mount the high horse by way of the soapbox. I don't buy his idea of

a limited nuclear war to compel the Gnomes of Zurich to open their files. My money goes on militant Islam to fuel the resentment of Malaysia and Indonesia against the rest of the southeast quadrant, perhaps leading to full scale war - a Malaysian *irredenta* against Singapore might set it off. Brin obviously discounts or ignores this factor. And if the Greenhouse Effect turns Patagonia, Northern Siberia etc. into desirable real estate, don't expect displaced Kurds, Bengalis and Brazilians to be head of the queue in the ensuing land-grab - it'll be farmboys from the dust-bowls of Kansas, flooded East Angles and the scorched Massif Central, with the technical and financial backing of rich, democratic governments, for that is how the rich, democratic governments stay in power. Pace Brin, a good thing too.

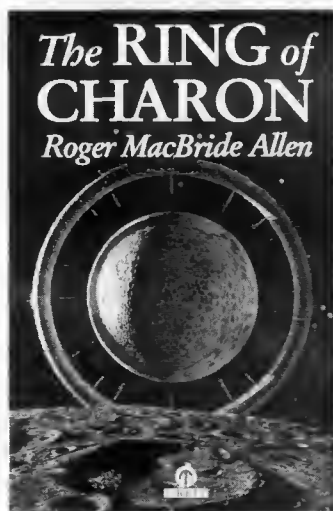
Or maybe a bad thing. Despite its pretentious title and silly system of section heads this is an ingenious, knowledgeable, well-crafted book about important matters. Brin preaches at times, but he does it honestly:

you can disagree with his conclusions while condemning neither his integrity nor his logic. See what fun I've had arguing with his book! If you hold any view whatever of environmental issues, you cannot fail to be illuminated by this thoughtful and good-humoured novel - unless you're part of the problem, of course. But then, the book addresses problems - you're still not left out.

As for me .. by the time all this is supposed to be happening, I'll be 92, and most likely dead or senile. On the other hand, maybe I'll be in a position to test my own predictions against Brin's - something to look forward to!

Finally, because this sort of thing needs to be said sometimes, stand up the goon who designed a typeface where you need a good microscope to tell a full point from a comma. And stand up the numb-brain who, working on an imprint named after a typeface, specified that it be used.

C. N. Gilmore.



**The Ring Of Charon**  
Roger MacBride Allen  
Orbit  
£14.95  
ISBN: 0 356 20120 1  
Hardback

Centuries in the future, the human race has spread out across the Solar System, and colonies have been built on the Moon, Mars and Pluto, and stations are in orbit around Venus, and in the asteroid belt. The most remote station, which is on Pluto, has been designed purely as a scientific research establishment, specifically to perform gravity research, and hopefully one day find a way to generate artificial gravity fields.

To this end a gigantic ring, a particle accelerator, has been constructed around Charon, the moon of Pluto. This remote location has been chosen for the research facility because its great distance from the Sun will reduce the effects of Solar gravity on the ring and, if the ring does successfully create a gravity field, it will not cause any disruption of the inner Solar system.

The station is being threatened with shut-down because of lack of progress, and the 120 scientists who are employed there are resigned to returning home as failures. At this point, Larry O'Shawnessy Chao, a brilliant twenty-five year old Irish/Chinese physicist, has a brain wave and conducts a late night experiment where he successfully generates a field of over one million gravities.

Unfortunately, the head of the station, Dr Simon Raphael blows his top when he hears of the unauthorised experiment, and refuses to believe that Chao managed to generate the enormous gravity field he claims, preferring to believe that it is a lie to delay the closure of the base. The station becomes polarised in two groups, those who believe that the experiment succeeded and that Chao is a genius, and those who think that he is a charlatan. The only way that Chao can regain his respect

is to conduct another experiment before the station is moth-balled, and with the help of a colleague, he sets out to prove his case. This time he sends a gravity wave through the Solar System, knowing that it will be detected by scientists throughout the system and that this will provide incontrovertible proof that he has succeeded in producing artificial gravity. Unfortunately this gravity wave is detected by an alien life form and leads to unexpected and disastrous results. The human race appears too feeble and primitive to influence the developments that begin to take place around it, and seems to be condemned to extinction.

Roger MacBride Allen has come up with a cracker of story this time. He manages to convey the horror of cataclysmic events happening on a planetary scale and leaves the reader with a feeling of helplessness as disaster follows disaster. He obviously knows, or has researched, his physics very well; nowhere in the story does one get the feeling of unease as some fabulous piece of equipment of dubious technique is used to get the characters out of trouble. As far as I could tell all of the science is either current knowledge or is a logical extension of this.

The story keeps up a rapid pace from the first page to the

last, and perhaps it was this pace that leads me to my main criticism of the story; things appeared to happen too fast. Vast changes take place in the Solar System, but no impression of the time required for these changes is given. I must emphasise that this is not a failing of the author's technical knowledge, but a failure of his writing to convey it. The only other criticism I could level at the book was that I found the life cycle of the aliens rather improbable; it seems unduly complex, but having said that I did not feel that it spoiled the story in any significant way.

According to the author, *The Ring of Charon* is 'The First Book of the Hunted Earth', meaning that we can look forward to other stories to follow on the same theme, but, he promises, each will be complete in itself. Hopefully the remaining tales in the series will reach the same high standard as this one. I found Roger MacBride Allen's last SF novel, *Orphan of Creation*, to be a slow, dull story, so was pleasantly surprised by the quality of *Ring of Charon*. If you like SF on the grand scale with believable science and characters, then you will enjoy this book.

Ed Hunt.



on high. During the time she is at Edwards, indeed before she arrives at Edwards, she has many adventures including a near plane crash, attempts on her life, an attempt on the President's life, and a space rescue. If fact life is so full that she hardly has any time to work on the new shuttle design. Nevertheless our heroine manages to come through it all with just the odd bruise, and lives to fight another day. Way to go Nicole.

It is difficult not to be critical of this book. Most heroes or heroines are larger than life, but just

how big can you get; mere mortals don't stand a chance. I find the style very unattractive and phrases such as "cut yourself some slack", leave me cold, but then that may just be me. At some points the writing goes right over the top, as in the following extract, an extreme, but my no means unique example.

*"The wildest aspect about being so tired while remaining fully functional was the way her thoughts wildly free-associated, memories and images scatter-shooting through*

*her head like freeway speedsters driving California rules. No courtesy, no quarter, you see an opening, you go for it, make the other sod get out of the way, and never ever hit the brake. Fighter jock Heaven, where they played with cars the way they did their fighters."*

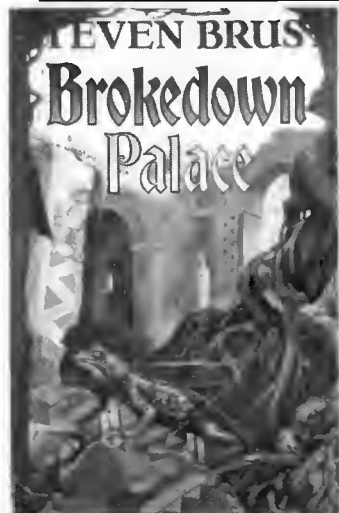
If this is what goes on in her head, it's no wonder that she's has been banned from driving the old space ship.

There are also the inevitable virtual reality scenes, but again

they are taken too far. At one point in the story, the heroine is bombarded with a series of VR experiences, which go on for seventeen pages, and it was at this point in the story I almost gave up through sheer boredom. I didn't give way though, and continued through to the bitter end, but it was hard going.

This is the first Chris Claremont SF story I have read and you may gather from this review that I was not very impressed. I am not likely to be found queuing for the sequel to this one.

Bryan Hunter



### Brokendown Palace

Steven Brust

Pan

£5.99

ISBN: 0 330 30793 2

Paperback

The modern standards of Fantasy provide plenty of opportu-

nity to accuse authors of band-wagoning, so it's all the more agreeable to rub up against something that feels as if a little trouble has been taken with it. Instead of Celtic or Anglo-Saxon mythic roots, **Brokendown Palace** relies on Hungarian legends for its background. Four brothers inhabit the eponymous decrepit structure: the King, Laszlo; clever, indecisive Andre; muscular Vilmos and young, stubborn Miklos. As the tale opens, we are thrust into the midst of their disharmony when we encounter Miklos, apparently dying, collapsed on the river bank after having been ejected from the family home by Laszlo. Rescued by a horse of supernatural abilities and unpronounceable name, Miklos wanders into the land of Faerie which borders the kingdom.

Now this might well kick off a conventional quest story, or a revenge tale, but Brust man-

ages things rather more astutely. Miklos returns to the palace after two years' absence, and sets about disturbing Laszlo's already shaky peace of mind, assisted by the horse, Bolk (the reader-friendly version of his title). During his wanderings, the castle has become seriously unstable, along with its master. Miklos' very existence becomes a taunt to the King, and the other two brothers must decide where they stand. Meanwhile, a strange tree is growing in the very heart of the building, and threatening its structure even more.

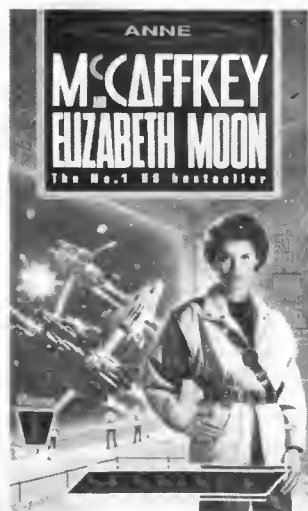
The characters and background make this novel, to the extent that it's a drama of character rather than one of action. The pressures on the brothers to take sides are well depicted; Brust imbues all his creations with credible drives and motives. You end up caring what happens to them, and I know

no better evidence of good characterisation. Plotting is less certain; a little while after putting the book down I realised that few scenes had stayed in my memory. However, Brust provides lots of convincing minor detail, even to the extent of a two page guide to Hungarian pronunciation (forty letters in the alphabet, thirty-nine of which seem to be variations of the 'u' sound). Less pleasingly, we get the obligatory fantasy novel map, covered in neatly triangular mountains and fluffy woods, all of which have dour names. There's a quaint little folk-tale between each chapter, there's a demon Goddess and a dragon. There's a Sword, naturally.

In summary, a lot of style and likeable with it. But where's the beef?

Three quickies. **Sassinak** tells the story of our young heroine who is thrust into slavery at age twelve, when the "Planet Pirates" capture her homeworld. Overcoming this minor hindrance in barely a chapter, Sassinak escapes to sign up at Fleet Headquarters, and swears to serve The Federation Of Sentient Planets (planets that think?). Rising rapidly through the ranks, she becomes a Commander by page 135. Well, she would, wouldn't she? Off she goes in her spacecruiser to take on the loathsome pirates wherever they lurk.

This - "Volume 1 of The Planet Pirates" - is a joint work by McCaffrey and Moon ("a young American writer who has served in the armed forces") which reeks of supervision of a younger author by one very much more capable. It reads like a 'young adult' novel, and I'd probably have enjoyed it at fifteen. But the characters are two-dimensional, the *deus ex machina* pops up far too often, and at least one chapter needed



### Sassinak

Anne McCaffrey & Elizabeth Moon

Orbit

£4.50

ISBN 0-7088-5243-2

Paperback



### Patterns

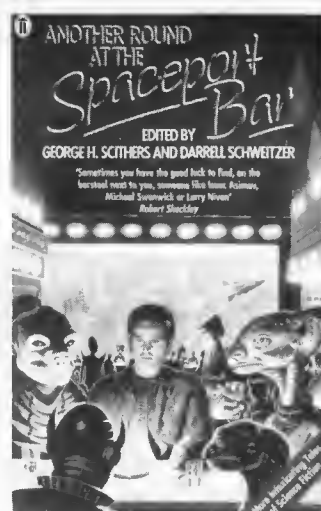
Pat Cadigan

Grafton

£3.99

ISBN 0-586-21148-9

Paperback



### Another Round at the Spaceport Bar

Ed. George H Scithers & Darrell Schweitzer

New English Library

£4.99

ISBN 0-450-54418-4

Paperback

multiple rereading before it made sense. I got the impression of some stern editing having taken place, probably with McCaffrey wielding the scissors. I note that in Volume 2 McCaffrey is assisted by Jody Lynn Nye, "the young American author of several critically acclaimed novels". So perhaps the Planet Pirates captured a Moon as well.

**Patterns** is very much more satisfactory. Winning the 1990 *Locus* Award for best short story collection, it brings together some of Cadigan's strongest stories, telling tales of now and near-future that will linger in your mind for many a long year. Cadigan takes us from TV assassinations to obsessive runners,

from a startling rock-and-roll addiction to further horizons in fashionable clubland. Favourites? Well, I'm a long way from calling "The Power And The Passion" my favourite anything, and I thought I'd read or seen just about every vampire tale many times over, but it has an appalling appeal, squeezing images into corners of your brain that you would have sworn were already full. Not everything in this collection is SF, but despite that and despite a cringe-worthy introduction by Bruce Sterling, this book is one for your shopping list.

And so to **Another Round At The Spaceport Bar**. I know everyone's had a go at that 'alien in the bar' scene, but the

idea of an anthology of such tales is surely irresistible. Now I missed the first volume, **Tales From The Spaceport Bar**, so I can't say if my personal favourite among such stories, Roger Zelazny's "Unicorn Variation", was included there; but if not, then I'd have thrown out the opening piece in this collection, "The Far King" by Richard Wilson, to make room for it here. A rambling, overlong and dreary work, it's poor encouragement to persevere with the book; and that would be a shame. For there's a lot of very good material here. Particularly worthy is John M Ford's "The Persecutor's Tale" - institutionalised vengeance in a perfectly realised alternative world. But you

should also look out for "Well Bottled At Slab's", a cracker of a ghost/wizard/landlord romp by John Gregory Betancourt, and if you like to tell your mates over the umpteenth pint about your UFO cover-up conspiracy theories or whatever, then take careful note of "Anyone Here From Utah?" *Don't* trust the harmless-looking bloke across lounge bar.

It's in the nature of these kinds of anthologies that there's a mix of the old and the newer, so you'll probably bump into one or two you recognise, but doesn't that always happen in pubs?

A.F. B. Edwards.

## ROBERT SILVERBERG



HIS BRILLIANT NEW NOVEL

## THE FACE OF THE WATERS

**The Face Of The Waters**

Author: Robert Silverberg

Publisher: Grafton

Price: £8.99

ISBN 0-586-21502-6

Paperback

A welcome sight indeed, this new novel by one of the established masters of the day. Silverberg's powerful and brilliantly realised work takes us to Hydros, a water planet without a spaceport, on which several generations of humanity have been stranded. Mankind has spread among the stars after the destruction of the Earth, and here on the ocean world a few small communities of exiles struggle to survive among countless forms of inimical aquatic life, many of them intelligent species. At best tolerated by the dominant race, which builds artificial islands woven from sea-plants, the few humans are tormented by the thought of the inaccessible stars with their technological wonders. Isolated by lack of such materials and skills, they live

off the indigenous creatures' leavings.

Valben Lawler, doctor to the tiny human community of Sorve Island, is thrust into the unaccustomed role of sea-traveller when a crisis of relations with the native Gillies forces the humans off Sorve, the only land most of them have ever known, and into a search for an island that will accept them. The ecology of each manufactured island is so finely balanced that the arrival of even a handful of immigrants could overturn it, and the enigmatic Gillies are indifferent to their fate. Led by the self-seeking merchant Delagard, and along with the entire community, Lawler sets sail into the unknown.

Silverberg tells his story with great skill, maintaining the mystery of the true nature of Hydros

until the last possible moment, and *en route* creates an ecology to rank with Dune. He has peopled it with some of the most plausible characters you are ever likely to encounter; dreamers, stoics, mystics, merchants and professionals, engineers and sailors. No simple fantasy, this; Hydros is a world of immense complexity and deep mystery which exerts an extraordinary influence on its doubly homeless human wanderers, dispossessed of both home planet and foster-home island. Their search will inevitably reveal as much about mankind as it does about Hydros.

Silverberg's narrative powers are beyond compare in this superb novel; it's undoubtedly a triumph.

A.F.B. Edwards



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# FAR POINT

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## FARPOINT MAGAZINE

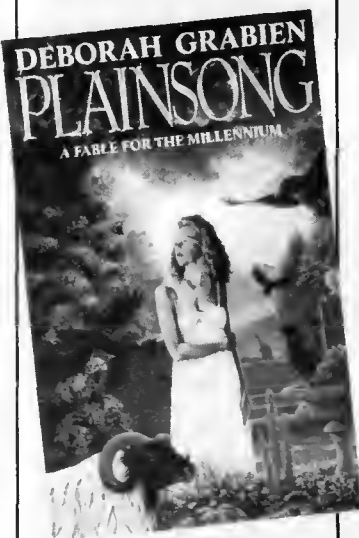
UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

NAME ..... ADDRESS ..... SIGNATURE .....

These pages detail the new books we've received at FAR POINT since the last issue appeared. Space obviously prevents us giving a full review to every one, so these pages simply provide you with the publisher's blurb and the details you'll need if you want to get hold of a copy. Full reviews of some of them will appear in future issues; this month's reviews start on page 54.

## Plainsong

Deborah Grabien  
Pan  
£4.50  
ISBN 0 330 31833 0  
Paperback



After the mysterious plague, pregnant Julia believes herself the only survivor. She lives out lazy, empty days in a green and pleasant countryside.

Until one sunny afternoon she meets the child Dilly and her little sister, Gad the cat and the four ravens - companions, protectors and guides as the new life approaches...

## Lord Valentine's Castle

Robert Silverberg  
Pan  
£5.99  
ISBN 0-330-26462-1  
Paperback

There are countless sights in the Coronal's vast empire of Majipoor. Four-armed Skandars, scaly Ghayrogs, tiny Vroons, leathery Hjorts, rootless trees, flesh-eating flowers...

And, walking alone through the crowded streets and deserted plains,



a stranger pursuing a dream.

The juggler Valentine. His dream was long and terrifying - and spoke of a fabulous inheritance. And now the time has come for the guardians of the dream to rise up and lay claim to their Kingdom...

(Re-issued in a new edition; first published 1981)

## The Venging

Greg Bear  
Legend  
£8.99  
ISBN 0 7126 5051 2  
Paperback



Absorbing, powerful short fiction from today's leading science fiction master.

Bear blends space exploration with the deep concerns of humankind, the mystery of an Isaac Asimov space saga with the plausibility of Clarke's before-their-time creations... Brilliant portrayals of humanity's future.

## White Queen

Gwynneth Jones  
Gollancz  
£14.99  
ISBN 0 575 04629 5  
Hardback

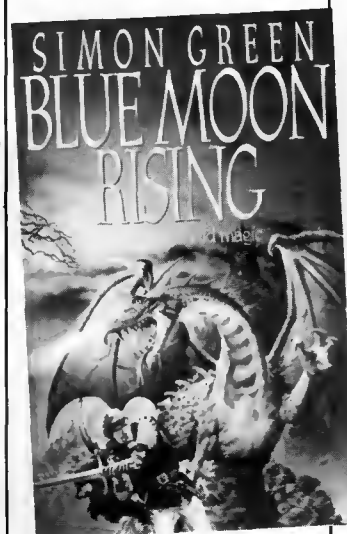


Johnny Guglioli used to be a journalist, until he was diagnosed as being infected with a QV virus. When, in exile from his native America, he encounters an enigmatic young woman (whom nobody seems capable of describing), his instincts for a particularly sensational story are aroused. From his observations, he is convinced that she is alien, and more than that, that she is part of a small group sent to reconnoitre Earth. Braemar Wilson, a pop-intellectual, media personality and attractive older woman, appears on the scene, with her

own, secret, interests in the 'alien'. Soon all three are involved in a deadly game of sex, politics and betrayal that pivots on the irremediable mis-matching of the two worlds.

## Blue Moon Rising

Simon Green  
Gollancz  
£7.99  
ISBN 0 575 05136 1  
Paperback



Deep in the forest King John's realm has existed peacefully for generations. But now the kingdom is disintegrating. The Darkwood is spreading, its malign rotten blackness encroaching on the living trees. Demons are massing, hunting in packs. Village by exterminated village, the Forest Kingdom is being destroyed. King John is out of money, out of men, out of hope. Even his own barons have turned against him, plotting his overthrow.

Prince Rupert, the younger son - and therefore not so much expendable as surplus to requirements - had been sent on a Quest. He wasn't supposed to come back. When he does,



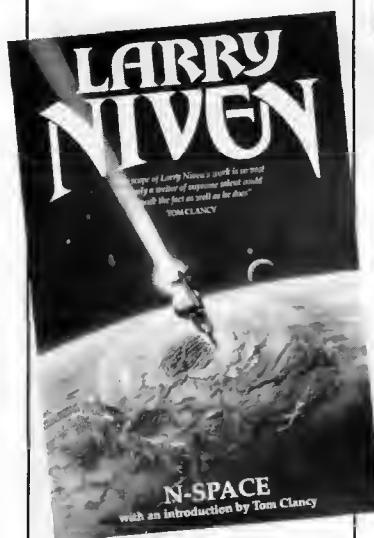
bringing the dragon with him - and the princess - he adds only confusion to disaster.

Even the help of the High Warlock - if they can sober him up for long enough - may not be sufficient to hold back the long night.

A second son, a tired dragon, a unicorn without a horn, and a princess with a wicked left hook: an unlikely company to face a Demon Prince - but face him they must, when the Blue Moon rises...

## N-Space

Larry Niven  
Orbit  
£14.99  
ISBN 0 356 20242 9  
Hardback



"One of the best damned storytellers in the business. Creates fresh new universes and populates them with characters you care about." (Poul Anderson)

"Intoxicating concepts, ideas, scientific extrapolations, and exotic hardware... Rich in imagination and sophisticated in breadth, Niven will challenge the most sophisticated reader." (Booklist)

"Known Space is a stunning example of what can be achieved by a fertile and disciplined imagination, and a broad and scrupulously consistent vision of future history." (Newsday)

## Anvil of Stars

Greg Bear  
Legend  
£8.99  
ISBN 0 7126 3890 3  
Paperback



A Ship of the Law travels the infinite enormity of space, carrying 82 young people: fighters, strategists, scientists; the Children. They are to conduct war against the xenocidal aliens who turned the Earth - and all but a fragment of humanity - into a smouldering cinder.

The Children work with sophisticated non-human technologies that need new thinking to comprehend them. They are cut off forever from the people they left behind. Denied information, they live within a complex system that is both obedient and beyond their control. They are frightened.

And they are making war against entities whose technologies are so advanced, so vast, as to dwarf them. Against something whose psychology is ultimately, unknowably alien ...

## Letters from Home

Pat Cadigan/Karen Joy Fowler/Pat Murphy  
The Women's Press  
£6.95  
ISBN: 0 7043 4280 4  
Paperback

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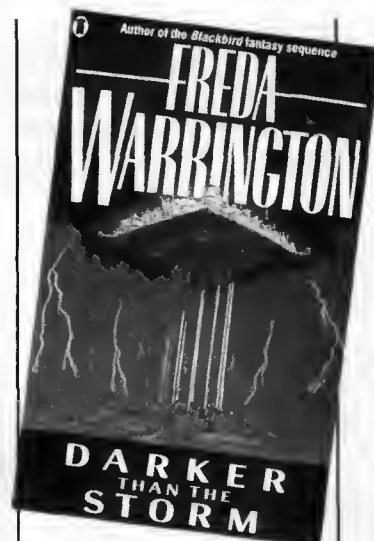
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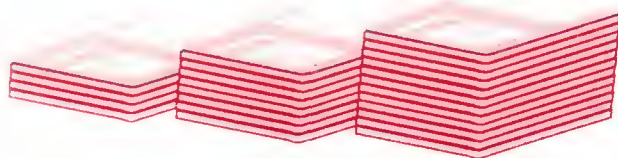
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sign of...*



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